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LIVING BULWARK sources of strength and renewal for Christian life and mission

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Extending God's Kingdom

"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you – and you shall be my witnesses to the ends of the earth" – Acts 1:8



- [In This Issue: Extending God's Kingdom](#)
- ["Reading the Signs of the Times: Prepare for Trials, but also for Glory,"](#) by Bruce Yocum
- [The De-Christianizing of Western Society,](#) by Steve Clark
- [An Enculturated People: An Obstacle to Building Christian Community?](#) by Bob Tedesco
- [Ecumenism of Discipleship,](#) by James Kushiner & [A Crown of Thorns for Unity,](#) Michael Harper



- [Thy Kingdom Come: An Ecumenical Global Prayer Movement](#) – Ascension Day to Pentecost
- [Extending God's Kingdom as a Community of Disciples on Mission,](#) by Carlos Mantica
- [Salt of the Empire: Families and Communities Evangelizing the World,](#) by Mike Aquilina
- [The Palm of Martyrdom](#) & [The Kingdom of Heaven Suffers Violence,](#) by Gregory the Great



- ["Sit at My Right Hand" Royal and Messianic Psalms,](#) by Jeanne Kun
- [Moms On Mission,](#) by Amy Hughes
- [Promoting Christian Unity in the Sword of the Spirit,](#) A North American Report by Joe Donovan
- [Bethany Association 10th Anniversary,](#) An Update Report



- [From Seed to Tree, and Spreading the Joy,](#) by Amin Kurani
- [Living with Thorns of the Flesh,](#) and [Saying No to the Blame Game,](#) by Tom Caballes
- [When You Lie...,](#) and [Do We Know What We Worship?](#) by Sam Williamson
- [Come, Holy Spirit: Prayers, Poems, Meditations, and Homilies](#)

Living Bulwark is committed to fostering renewal of the whole Christian people: Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. We especially want to give witness to the charismatic, ecumenical, evangelistic, and community dimensions of that renewal. Living Bulwark seeks to equip Christians to grow in holiness, to apply Christian teaching to their lives, and to respond with faith and generosity to the working of the Holy Spirit in our day.



Extending God's Kingdom

*“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,
and you shall be my witnesses to the ends of the earth”*

– Acts 1:8

In This Issue

Do you know the voice of your Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, who calls you each and every day to follow him? And do you know the power of his kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit? Today we witness a new Pentecost and outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the people of God who listen to the voice of their Savior and Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

A new ecumenism of discipleship

Jesus told his first disciples (followers), "I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd" (John 10:16). Today we witness a new ecumenism of discipleship and a new evangelization and call to make disciples of all nations, peoples, languages, and tribes of the earth. [See James Kushiner's article on [Ecumenism of Discipleship](#).]

John the Baptist prophesied that the Messiah would "baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matthew 3:11 and Luke 3:16). We see this fulfilled at the outpouring of the Holy Spirit marked with the sign of tongues of fire over the heads of the first disciples gathered together in prayer on the Feast of Pentecost. Before his departure into heaven, Jesus explained the reason for this extraordinary outpouring of the Holy Spirit:

*“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my
witnesses to the ends of the earth” – Acts 1:8*

The transforming power and fire of the Holy Spirit

The Lord Jesus continues to give his disciples today the power and fire of the Holy Spirit that we may radiate the joy and truth of the Gospel to a world in desperate need of God's light and truth. His word has power to change and transform our lives that we may be burning lights pointing others to Jesus Christ. Like John the Baptist, we too are called to give witness to the light and truth of Jesus Christ. Do you want the Lord's power, grace, and love to burn brightly in your life? Ask him to renew in you the grace of Pentecost and a thirst for holiness and zeal to extend Christ's kingdom through the witness of your life and testimony.

May this issue inspire each of us to pray fervently for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all disciples of Christ throughout the world today that we may grow in unity and love for one another and for boldness to bring the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ to every man, woman, and child on the face of the earth.

Sincerely in Christ,
Don Schwager
editor

Top illustration of disciples from the nations following Jesus Christ (c) by Rachel Chung

Return to [Table of Contents](#) or [Archives](#) • (c) copyright 2019 [The Sword of the Spirit](#)

“Reading the Signs of the Times”



Prepare for Trials, but Also for Glory

by Bruce Yocum

Introduction to “Reading the Signs of the Times”

by Bernhard Stock

Under this headline, “Reading the Signs of the Times”, we want to sporadically publish articles, book reviews and other material which have a prophetic orientation: reading the signs of the times and trying to understand what the Lord is telling us, or has already told us as the Sword of the Spirit. He has called us to be a prophetic people and to “build a bulwark against the tide of evil” – for this, we should learn to understand what the evil tides are and how we can be equipped to counter them.

The following article was written by Bruce Yocum for a Catholic audience and was first published in “Good News” November 2012 Issue, the magazine for Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) in Britain and Ireland. Used with permission.

As the Sword of the Spirit, we are an Ecumenical Community of Communities, but precisely because of that, the things happening in the Catholic Church of today cannot leave us untouched. “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26). And what is described in the article is, of course, something happening with all Christian Churches and denominations, and not only with Catholics.

[Bernhard Stock was the long-term Senior Coordinator of Brot des Lebens in Munich, Germany and Regional Coordinator for Leaders Training in the European Region. He is currently the director of the Catholic Teaching Institute, an institute which develops and provides teaching for Catholic Members in the Sword of the Spirit.]

"And so it seems certain to me that the Church is facing very hard times. The real crisis has scarcely begun. We will have to count on terrific upheavals"

(Joseph Ratzinger)¹

Whether Joseph Ratzinger would have considered these words prophetic when he wrote them in 1969, or whether he viewed them as merely a prediction I do not know. My guess is that Joseph Ratzinger was predicting, but predicting confidently and on theological and sociological grounds. He says "One may predict that all of this (the changes he describes) will take time" and he opposes that prediction to "the big talk of those who prophesy a Church without God and without faith."

Whatever the theologian Joseph Ratzinger thought he was doing at the time, I believe that we can now confidently say that these words were prophetic. Probably no one would have been bold enough in 1969 to predict, or prophesy, that Joseph Ratzinger would one day be Pope, and be Pope in a time of profound crisis in the Church. But he is², and his words from 1969 have thus received a sort of second life, and can be found in scores, perhaps hundreds of places on the internet. He may not have been self-consciously prophesying in 1969, but events have made clear that these words were prophetic.

A few years later the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, a thoroughly unexpected, rapidly growing phenomenon in the Church, held an international Conference in Rome. The surprising culmination of the Conference was the address of Pope Paul VI after the celebration of the closing Mass of the Conference on Monday 19th May, 1975. The Pope's address signaled a cautious but very genuine acceptance of the charismatic renewal by the highest leadership of the Church. That this new phenomenon in the Church should have received such encouragement a bare eight years after its first appearance was remarkable.

Permission to exercise prophetic gifts at a papal Mass

The Mass which preceded this address by Paul VI also brought surprises. Cardinal Suenens celebrated, by exception, on the Papal Altar above the tomb of St. Peter, with over 10,000 Conference participants present. Not only was it a typically noisy and enthusiastic charismatic assembly, but we were given permission to have a time after communion for the exercise of prophetic gifts. The time after communion, or in fact as the distribution of communion was taking place, was somewhat chaotic. Paul urges us in his letter to the Corinthians to do everything in the assembly "decently and in order" but with ten thousand highly charged charismatics surging around, well, the "order" aspect was a bit of a challenge. Furthermore, just at the moment when it was needed, the sound system failed. A quick assessment revealed that the only microphone which worked was that on the Papal Altar itself.

Ralph Martin and Bruce Yocum give prophetic words from the Papal Altar

At that very moment Ralph Martin told me that he believed he had a somewhat urgent prophetic message. As there appeared to be no alternative, I told Ralph to use the microphone on the papal altar. Thus it was that his prophecy had a dramatic setting. What Ralph prophesied was equally dramatic:

"Because I love you, I want to show you what I am doing in the world today. I want to prepare you for what is to come. Days of darkness are coming on the world, days of tribulation ... Buildings that are now standing will not be standing. Supports that

are there for my people now will not be there. I want you to be prepared, my people, to know only me and to cleave to me and to have me in a way deeper than ever before. I will lead you into the desert ... I will strip you of everything that you are depending on now, so you depend just on me. A time of darkness is coming on the world, but a time of glory is coming for my Church, a time of glory is coming for my people. I will pour out on you all the gifts of my Spirit. I will prepare you for spiritual combat; I will prepare you for a time of evangelism that the world has never seen ..."

The minor chaos going on around the altar prevented me from hearing what Ralph said, but I, like Ralph, felt a strong and urgent sense that I should prophesy. As soon as Ralph had finished I went to the microphone and prophesied:

"I speak to you of the dawn of a 'new age' for my Church. I speak to you of a day that has not been seen before ... Prepare yourselves for the action that I begin now, because things that you see around you will change; the combat that you must enter now is different; it is new ... You need wisdom from me that you do not yet have. Open your eyes, open your hearts to prepare yourselves for me and for the day that I have now begun. My Church will be different; my people will be different; difficulties and trials will come upon you. The comfort that you know now will be far from you, but the comfort that you will have is the comfort of my Holy Spirit. They will send for you, to take your life, but I will support you. Come to me. Band yourselves together, around me. Prepare, for I proclaim a new day, a day of victory and of triumph for your God. Behold, it is begun".

In the years that followed the 1975 Conference those prophecies were much discussed. "Days of darkness" and "hard times" became common terms in discussions of what the Lord was saying and doing in the Church and in the world.

"I speak to you of the dawn of a 'new age' for my Church.
I speak to you of a day that has not been seen before ...
Prepare yourselves for the action that I begin now,
because things that you see around you will change; the
combat that you must enter now is different; it is new ...

Bruce Yocum 1975

What do the Days of Darkness and Hard Times mean?

These prophetic words were not universally accepted. I recall a conversation with a university chaplain in Dublin, just before the Charismatic Conference held there in 1978. He was brimming with confidence over the future of the Church in Ireland. "Our Masses are full of young people, many of them serving enthusiastically in the parish." "But do you not think," I asked, "that there are signs that may not continue? In many places - France, Belgium, the United States - there has been a serious decline in recent years, and there are few signs of any improvement." His confidence was undiminished. "Perhaps in those countries, yes. But here in Ireland the faith is deep, and I do not see any reason to believe that we will experience such a decline."

Twenty years later that same priest approached me at another conference and told me that he recalled our earlier conversation. The recent, and for him shocking changes in the condition of

the Church in Ireland had opened his eyes. "Perhaps," I ventured, "the change was not in the condition, but in the appearance of the Church." Probably that priest had never heard Ratzinger's words, or if he had would have considered them, like the 1975 prophecies, applicable somewhere else. But if he had listened well he would have been warned, for Ratzinger said "We will have to count on terrific upheavals."

"Because I love you, I want to show you what I am doing in the world today. I want to prepare you for what is to come. Days of darkness are coming on the world, days of tribulation ... I want you to be prepared, my people, to know only me and to cleave to me and to have me in a way deeper than ever before. I will lead you into the desert ..."

Ralph Martin 1975

Ratzinger's prediction for the Church

We certainly have seen "terrific upheavals" and doubtless will see many more. Ratzinger's description of what will soon happen is startlingly accurate, and if we take it seriously, should help us see what we can expect as the "upheavals" continue.

"The Church will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning. She will no longer be able to inhabit many of the edifices she built in prosperity. As the number of her adherents diminishes ... she will lose many of her social privileges. ... As a small society, [the Church] will make much bigger demands on the initiative of her individual members...."

Yet it would be wrong to view either Joseph Ratzinger's prediction or the 1975 prophecies as "pessimistic." First of all, Ratzinger describes a "process" through which the Church must pass, a process that is difficult, but by no means bad.

"It will be hard-going for the Church, for the process of crystallization and clarification will cost her much valuable energy. It will make her poor and cause her to become the Church of the meek ... The process will be long and wearisome as was the road from the false progressivism on the eve of the French Revolution - when a bishop might be thought smart if he made fun of dogmas and even insinuated that the existence of God was by no means certain ... But when the trial of this sifting is past, a great power will flow from a more spiritualized and simplified Church."

This description of the "process of crystallization and clarification" bears striking resemblance to the prophecies of 1975. These are indeed words of warning, calls to be ready for suffering, to be ready to endure a "process ... long and wearisome." But this process has a purpose, it is a "trial of ... sifting" which God brings about so that "... a great power will flow from a more spiritualized and simplified Church." Thousands of years ago the Lord told Israel "The former things I declared of old, they went forth from my mouth and I made them known: then suddenly I did them and they came to pass ... I declared them to you from of old, before they came to pass I announced them to you... You have heard; now see all this; and will you not declare it?" (Isaiah 48:3-7)

Joseph Ratzinger - Pope Benedict XVI - has given us not only a warning, but a description of what to expect. We need not be unprepared or shocked or taken by surprise.

Prepare for trials but also for glory

Nor need we be discouraged. The prophecies of 1975 tell us to prepare, to prepare not only for trials, but to "prepare, for I proclaim a new day, a day of victory and of triumph for your God." They tell us that a time of darkness is Coming, but "... a time of glory is coming for my Church, a time of glory is coming for my people. I will pour out on you all the gifts of my Spirit ... I will prepare you for a time of evangelism that the world has never seen."

Benedict XVI has also told us that his conviction is not only that the Church will face trials, but that those trials will lead to a renewed Church.

"But I am equally certain about what will remain at the end: not the Church of the political cult, which is dead already, but the Church of faith. She may well no longer be the dominant social power to the extent that she was until recently; but she will enjoy a fresh blossoming and be seen as man's home, where he will find life and hope beyond death."

Notes:

[1] Joseph Ratzinger, *Faith and the Future*. first published in 1969 and re-published by Ignatius Press in 2009

[2] This article was first published in 2012

This article was first published in "[GoodNews](#)" November/December 2012 Issue, the magazine for Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) in Britain and Ireland. Used with permission.

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illustration above by (c) Kevin Carden

Return to [Table of Contents](#) or [Archives](#) • (c) copyright 2019 [The Sword of the Spirit](#)



The De-Christianizing of Western Society

by Steve Clark

This is an excerpt from Steve Clark's book, *Building Christian Communities: Strategy for Renewing the Church*, 1996 Edition. reprinted by Tabor House, pages 39-44. It was first published in 1972 by Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, and then republished in 1992 by Word of Joy Foundation, Inc., Quezon City, Philippines.

When society as a whole cannot be expected to accept Christianity, then it is necessary to form communities within society to make Christian life possible.

Providing Christian environments – environments where Christianity is openly expressed and accepted and where a person can find the support he or she needs to be a Christian – is a top priority and main goal of pastoral work. The question that remains is how such environments can be formed. Our society is not Christian. Even within our Churches, Christian environments are not so easy to find. What can be done?

The answer is that we need to form “Christian communities.” A community is a type of environment – a strong, effective form of environment. (In chapter 3 of *Building Christian Communities*, the nature of “community” will be discussed, and the different meanings of the word will be distinguished). In this section, community is understood as a Christian environment.

Development of communities in early church period

A historical perspective provides a way of seeing more clearly the pastoral situation of the Church today as regards to environmental forces and community. In the first 300 years of Christian history

the Church had a very effective form of social organization for helping Christians to live as Christians. Those who became Christians perceived Christianity as the most important thing that ever happened to the human race. They readily joined with other Christians for the purpose of living as Christians. The communities they joined were relatively small and tightly knit, with a high degree of morale and social cohesion. The result was that a person who lived in the Christian Church in the early centuries had a great deal of help in living as a strong Christian. He was part of an environment (a community) which was much stronger than any other environment he was part of, and it provided for him a strong support in being a Christian. Because of their strength and vitality, these communities attracted others to Christianity.

Formation of Christendom beginning in the 4th century

In the course of the fourth century a major change occurred. The Roman emperors became Christians, and they made Christianity the state religion. The result was a revolution in the way Christianity was related to the environmental forces of the time. In a relatively short period, all of society became Christian (part of the Church). Christianity no longer existed in strong communities within society, but being part of society and being Christians became the same thing. The Church became the religious institution for all of society and the state became the political institution for all of society. In other words, Christendom (a society almost all of whose members accepted Christianity) was formed.

Christendom brought many benefits to Christian life. For one thing, it brought many more people to the Christian faith and life. At the beginning of the fourth century the Christians were a relatively small percentage of the Roman Empire. At the end of the fifth century, the pagans were a relatively small percentage of the Roman Empire. Every environment in society (with the exception of some frontier situations where two civilizations made contact and, for a while, some remote rural situations) was Christian. There was a strong force drawing people to Christianity and keeping them Christians.

Moreover, because Christianity was the life of society, everything in life could be Christianized and directed toward the glory of God. The following centuries were times in which men tried to see all of life in a Christian way. It would be too much to say that they succeeded perfectly. But the results were impressive.

There was, however, at the same time a certain price to be paid in this change. The environment worked to make more people Christian than had been Christian before, it is true, but it also produced a lower overall level of Christianity among Christians. For one thing, since everyone was a Christian, people were not called upon to make their Christianity a matter of personal choice the way they had to when there were other options. Also, because a person had to become an outcast in society if he stopped being a Christian (since it was a Christian society), many people were inclined to stay Christians even though they had no desire to live a Christian life while before they would have just dropped out. Also, it became harder to maintain Church discipline when the Church was no longer a tightly knit community within society from which someone could be easily excluded.

Rise of Deism and skepticism in 17th - 18th centuries

In the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, another revolution occurred in the way Christianity was related to the environmental forces of the time. Society began to fall away from Christian belief. It became acceptable in society not to believe in Christianity (it was socially acceptable even before it was legally acceptable). The change began among certain thinkers in France and England who moved toward Deism and skepticism about Christianity. By the 18th century, the Enlightenment, represented by men like Voltaire, Diderot, Priestly and many others, was a dominant force in Europe. Environments began to change one by one, and as environments changed, the faith of the Christian people weakened. Because they had been taught to identify "what was right" in matters of religion with "what was accepted by society as a whole" most

people began to weaken in their Christian conviction and their Christian living when they saw that Christianity was not being accepted by society as a whole the way it had been.

In the Church of the first centuries, the fact that most men did not believe in Christianity was not necessarily a motive for losing faith. In fact, for many it was a strengthening motive, because they expected that when they became Christians, they were joining a group within society that had something the rest of society did not have. But since by the end of the 17th century Christians considered themselves to be society and not a group within society (they identified themselves primarily as Christians), a change in the religious convictions of Christians. Therefore as society became less and less supportive of a person's being a Christian, there was a gradual weakening of the environmental support for being a Christian.

A variety of things happened as a result of this change. Some environments in Western society stayed Christian because they were out of touch with the main currents of society (many rural environments are still in this condition today, although less and less so). In the United States, ghettos were formed by immigrants who had little social contact with the rest of the country because of the nationality difference (and this trend was strengthened by the attempts of the Church to maintain a separate school system and a separate social system, by forbidding mixed marriages, etc.). These ghettos stayed Catholic – in fact, they tended to perpetuate a form of Christendom. But in an increasing number of situations in Western society, the environment provided less and less support for thinking and living as a Christian, and the result was a weakening of Christian life.

Environmental forces against Christianity today

Today many parts of Western society are de-Christianized, and the trend is in that direction. In fact, even within Church institutions, even in environments which during the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries were traditionally Christian (like Polish and Irish neighborhoods in American cities), the environmental forces are now against Christianity. Since there is less and less of a natural separation between different environments (modern forms of communication have drawn modern society much closer and made it much more homogeneous), the Church can rely less and less on natural environmental forces (rural or ghetto conservatism, for instance, or separate schools systems) to maintain Christian life.

There are two pastoral approaches that can be taken in the face of the de-Christianization of Western society. One is to try to make society as a whole Christian (or different environments as a whole Christian). Traditionally this has only worked when someone or some group of people who had control over a whole environment (the secular rulers, usually) became Christian and were willing to use their influence to Christianize the parts of society they were in control of. Conceivably making environments as a whole Christian might also be accomplished through Christians and Christian ideas beginning to permeate society in different environments in society gradually, the way technological changes or political ideas begin to permeate society gradually. But the approach of making society as a whole Christian does not seem very feasible, because society as a whole is resistant to Christianity, and therefore it seems highly unlikely either that secular rulers would or could make all of society Christian or that Christianity will permeate society by natural trends.

Returning to the pastoral strategy of the early church period

The second pastoral approach is to form Christian communities. This approach would mean returning to the strategy which the early Church (and many other religious groups throughout the centuries) found so useful. A real Christian community (especially in a society like our own in which there is little sense of common purpose and identity) would have the ability to provide an environment in which people could live strong Christian lives. If people can find Christian communities which are alive, they will have the strength as Christians to exert influence upon

society (and not simply conform to society). And the more these Christian communities grow, the greater the effect they will have upon society.

A "diaspora Christianity"

The main goal of pastoral action in the Church today can be described in a variety of ways. We need to find an alternative form of Church life to a Christendom approach. To use a phrase which Karl Rahner made popular: We need to form a diaspora Christianity. We need to find a way of providing for people an authentically Christian environment of sufficient strength to make it possible for them to live as vital Christians if they so choose. We need to form real Christian communities.

> See other [articles in Living Bulwark](#) by [Steve Clark](#)

top photo: The ruins of Kirkstall Abbey Hall in Leeds, UK being explored by a tourist, (c) photo by Matt Latham
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Steve Clark has been a founding leader, author, and teacher for the Catholic charismatic renewal since its inception in 1967. Steve is past president of the [Sword of the Spirit](#), an international ecumenical association of charismatic covenant communities worldwide. He is the founder of the [Servants of the Word](#), an ecumenical international missionary brotherhood of men living single for the Lord.

Steve Clark has authored a number of books, including *Baptized in the Spirit and Spiritual Gifts*, *Finding New Life in the Spirit*, *Growing in Faith*, and *Knowing God's Will*, *Building Christian Communities*, *Man and Woman in Christ*, *The Old Testament in Light of the New*.

Return to [Table of Contents](#) or [Archives](#) • (c) copyright 2019 [The Sword of the Spirit](#)

[June/July 2019 - Vol. 104](#)



An Enculturated People

“What is the number one obstacle to building Christian community?”

by Bob Tedesco

Worldwide Movements

It seems that almost everywhere around the world groups are working to build Christian community. There are worldwide and national movements as well as small, local groups trying to recover something lost: relationships...with God and neighbor. The efforts invariably lead to the question, “What are the blocks to building Christian community?” Over forty years of experience with our particular network of communities (Sword of the Spirit) has led me to the question, “What is the number one obstacle to building Christian community?” My answer: “**Enculturation**”.

The definition of enculturation has some variations over academic disciplines, but for this discussion I mean: **absorbing or acquiring the values and behaviors of the culture that we live in**. All of us do this somewhat, but there is a degree to which we are changed; where our decisions, our recreation and even our schedules are more determined by the world around us than by the Christian life we have chosen. I think the key factor is that we absorb or acquire the world’s values which are frequently opposed to the values of the Kingdom of God.

When worldly success is more important than the Christian life, we’ve got a problem. When education is more important than Christian mission, we’ve got a problem. When Christian parents will not raise the values of the Kingdom of God far above the values of the world, we’ve *really* got a problem. Now, I’m not against worldly success, good jobs, and good education, but the eternal values and consequences of the Kingdom of God far surpass most earthly activities and pursuits in importance. Much of Christianity is involved in living out this reality!

Several years back I put together a hard-bound picture-book of my engineering career: projects, designs, inventions, etc. It was purposely designed to get my grandchildren to say, “Oh, look what Pappy did!” as they turned the pages. And then at the end I let them know that it doesn’t begin to compare to how I value my work battling for souls. I would lay down my entire professional career to help a person to give his life to Christ. I hoped that my grandchildren could begin to see that eternal consequences and salvation far outweigh earthly accomplishments; and while we’re working on education and careers, we should also be firmly invested in the Kingdom of God. A man who is a friend of Jesus, counted as his disciple...what can be smarter than that? Who can be more successful than that?

Community Teaching

Over the years we have taught against becoming a “worldly people”. Our basic initiations courses have taught about the biblical obstacles of the world, the flesh, and the devil; and we’ve coupled these with the need for the repair of wrongdoing. “The world” refers not to the bounty of creation, but to the anti-god focus in the culture: philosophies, values, and mores that do not support godly living. These collective obstacles have a real malignant synergy about them which creates quite a few challenges for the new or young Christian.

When we warn against becoming a “worldly” people, most people envision a hedonistic “party animal” when desires are out of control. We might have a spring-break image in our minds. These courses are usually presented to newer Christians so we might think that more mature Christians are less susceptible to becoming worldly. That might very well be a deadly error. In fact, it’s many of the good things of the world that can lead to faulty personal discipleship or faulty parenting. Sports are good, an active life is good, a well-paying job is good, education is good, success is good. But when any of these things take on more importance than our Christian calling we have become an enculturated person. We tend to think that most of our desires are godly; and some of them are. But, when my plans become more important than God’s we have a colossal error.

Most of us have heard the frog in the pot of water on a stove does not notice that the temperature of the water is rising until it is too late and he is unable to jump to freedom. Some of these earthly values are that way. The desire for success slowly becomes more and more important to us until we seem unable to escape and now it controls us: our decisions, our relationships, and all of our energies.

Some things in the world are good and worth absorbing. All are worthy of caution and many are capable of destroying our lives.

In the early years of our network of communities, a common pattern for developing a talk would be to identify some aspect(s) of the world or culture, apply some scriptures that address these aspects, followed by practical advice. We have become more multi-faceted in our approaches to outlines, but this article is following that common template.

The Common, Repeatable Cycle

There is a recurring cycle presented in scripture: blessings – freedom – good life; comfortable – lazy – malaise; guard down – vulnerable – enculturated; called-out – disciplined – punished; misery – repentance – restored. Or more simply: with God, enculturated, punished, repentant, and restored. This historical cycle is so common that you have to see it as a force to be reckoned with.

Old Testament Scriptures

1. Joshua 23: 6-8 Therefore be very steadfast to keep and do all that is written in the book of

the law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left, that you may not be mixed with these nations left here among you, or make mention of the names of their gods, or swear by them, or serve them, or bow down yourselves to them, but cleave to the Lord your God as you have done to this day.

2. Deuteronomy 12:30 Take heed that you not be ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, “How did these nations serve their gods?” – that I also may do likewise.
3. 2 Kings 17: 14-15b But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been...and they followed the nations that were round about them, concerning whom the Lord had commanded them that they should not do like them.
4. 2 Kings 17:33-34, 40-41 So they feared the Lord but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away. To this day they do according to the former manner...However, they would not listen, but they did according to their former manner. So these nations feared the Lord, and also served their graven images; their children likewise, and their children’s children – as their fathers did, so they do to this day.
5. Deuteronomy 18:9 When you come into the land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations.
6. Haggai 1:4 “Is it a time for you to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruin?”
7. Haggai 1:9 You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? Says the Lord of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while you busy yourselves each with his own house.

New Testament Scriptures

1. 2 Corinthians 5:20 so we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.
2. 2 Corinthians 6:16b-18 For we are the temple of the living God, as God said, “I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.”
3. Matthew 6:21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
4. Matthew 5:14 “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Comments

We are ambassadors for Christ. An ambassador brings his culture to a foreign land. His embassy is a microcosm of the nation he represents. He (or she) is not there to absorb the culture around him but to represent his homeland and its government. The values, culture, and lifestyle of his home nation is represented to the foreign land. He has no lasting home there and he knows it. He is on assignment.

“Come out from among them,” seems harsh. “Be separate from them,” seems elitist. But these statements are true; they are the end game...the way things will end up at the end of the day. The promise is even greater, “...then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.”

Our treasure and our heart... is success more important than the kingdom of God? Is our children’s success more important than the kingdom of God? Have we let them know that Jesus and his kingdom is more important than success and education? In the world, education and

money are thought to be the solution to just about everything. If there's a problem "throw money at it." Or maybe a course will solve it. Yet we know the solution: Christ-centered living is in fact the solution to just about everything.

Evangelism and discipleship can bring such life if we just made it our "go to" contribution to society's needs. My wife, Bobbie, just survived a bout of heart failure, and while discussing the great benefits she had received from the medical treatment, she said, "And my recovery was due in no small part to the many people around the world who were praying for me." (She has a lot of friends!) The doctor questioned, "Do you believe that?" We both said, "Yes!" He said, "Good! I believe that too!" It seemed good that the Lord and the body of Christ got some of the credit since the battle for her life had been fought spiritually as well as physically and medically. It was a good example of the best of our culture and the best of the Kingdom cooperating to save a life. (Actually, the best of medicine is from the Lord. I doubt that the devil is teaching anyone to save lives.)

"A city set on a hill..." "a lamp on a stand..." they are both distinct; they both stand out. Communities of Christians living a Christian way of life are like snapshots of the kingdom of God, and our families are like "wallet-size" pictures of a better way. We should not try to blend in as much as we try to show forth the life of God. That brings hope; that brings conversion.

The Ancient Pattern and Daily Life

Enculturation finds its way into family, parenting, work, church, and even individual or personal disciplines. Some denominations are losing blocks of people as they tolerate and even defend scripturally immoral practices. They have been enculturated. I worked for a company once that lied to the customer about completion dates for prototypes and project goals. The work environment had become riddled with, "anything for a sale." I wouldn't do it, but my boss found it easy. Down the road, when the customer had become enraged, he was fired.

One of the main effects of the pattern of Christian community life is when our parents model their goals and expectations for their children in the same fashion as the world. Important decisions like the choice of college or courtship approaches can undo years of strong parenting.

So, How Are We Doing? Are We Immune from This Ancient Pattern?

Are the younger generations most affected? We can see some of their enculturation by observing the differences between the younger generations and the older. The roles of husband and wife are different; the roles of men and women, parenting models; life styles and values. Some of the differences are good, some are not. The need to be there each time little Johnny blows a note out of his trumpet is not so good.

In trying to personally assess our own enculturation, we could ask the question, "Am I still other-centered and willing to serve?" If we are willing to serve and can place other's needs before our own, that's a good sign. Another revealing question is, "Is ushering in the Kingdom of God a driving force in my life?" Or is it a side interest?

A Few Practical Steps in Response to Enculturation

1. If you're in a community, remember the covenant, read the covenant...at home and in small groups.
2. A covenant decision is a decision not to schedule things when our small group or the larger community gathers. Decide to protect those time slots.
3. Review your relationship "center of gravity." This is intentional community; we have given our lives to God and a specific set of people.
4. Discipleship involves a time commitment, a financial commitment, a relational commitment...renew or rededicate as needed.

5. Decide again to look different, be different. In the song, House of God, we ask to be made living lights, set upon the hill.
6. Decide again to be trainable, correctible, and even willing to receive a rebuke! In the world people can no longer handle correction; everyone gets insulted at the suggestion that he (or she) could be doing something wrong. The US Navy SEAL creed says, "My training is never complete." That's actually truer of a disciple of Jesus!
7. Work to overcome obstacles that keep you from special offerings of community teaching: retreats, conferences, and regional conferences. Plan and save (one year ahead).
8. Pray and consecrate our lives to the Lord to be free from the influences of the world, the flesh and the devil.

In all of this the Lord knows our strengths, our weaknesses, our influences and our failures. He is able to use it all, transform it all and cause our lives to have purpose in his Kingdom. His plan is truly amazing, surprising, and redeeming...and we can take great comfort in that.

> [See other articles by Bob Tedesco](#)



Bob Tedesco is past President of the North American Region of the Sword of the Spirit. He is a founder of the [People of God](#) community in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA, and has been one of its key leaders for the past 42 years.

Return to [Table of Contents](#) or [Archives](#) • (c) copyright 2019 [The Sword of the Spirit](#)



Ecumenism of Discipleship

by James M. Kushiner

"And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch" (Acts 11:26). *Christian* is the most common term we use today, but in the apostolic church, the name didn't initially stick. It did not originate with Jesus and was not chosen by his disciples. It was the label the Antiochenes put on the members of a new Jewish sect who followed the teachings of the latest *messiah* (Hebrew for *anointed one*, Greek, *christos*). They could just as well have called them "messianics."

A few years later, Agrippa asked Paul if he intended to persuade him "to be a Christian" (Acts 26:26). Paul said yes, but did not repeat the label. Peter wrote, "If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name." The name "Christian" would have been spoken as an accusation; Peter said to own it with honor. *Christian* was useful over many centuries, but it also has been qualified by adjectives reflecting division: Nestorian, Chalcedonian, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Byzantine, Protestant, Anabaptist, Evangelical, and so on.

Nowadays, even those labels are contended. A recent book, *Still Evangelical? Insiders Reconsider Political, Social, and Theological Meaning*, asks, according to InterVarsity Press, "In the Age of Trump, Can We Still Be Evangelical?" IVP claims, "Evangelicalism in America has cracked, split on the shoals of the 2016 presidential election and its aftermath, leaving many wondering if they want to be in or out of the evangelical tribe." A schism over an election? Perhaps some put too much stock in politics. Or perhaps a copywriter is overstating the case. Regardless, tensions over political, social, and moral issues exist within other churches, too, including Catholic, Evangelical, Reformed, Anglican, and Orthodox ones. People tend to wonder, even if they don't ask, "Is he a liberal Catholic (or Evangelical, or Reformed, etc.) or a traditional one?"

Discipleship is the ecumenism needed today. Christians – Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, or other – who are serious disciples recognize each other when they meet.

Perhaps these labels have more currency today because of our fractious culture of identity politics. It may be timely to recall that the first Christians knew and identified themselves first as disciples, *mathetes*, that is, "learners," students following the teachings of Jesus. They had accepted Jesus' invitation: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn (*mathete*) from me." Jesus charged them to "*make disciples (matheteusate)* of all nations." The apostles did, and so the Book of Acts is filled with references to disciples.

The word *disciple* puts the priority on our posture as humble students of Christ rather than on asserting various interpretations of theology. A disciple is someone who follows closely someone else's teachings. Disciples of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Peter Drucker, or Saul Alinsky are expected to adhere closely to their mentor's teaching in, respectively, social theory, psychology, business management, or political activism.

The teachings of Jesus, however, are all-encompassing. They are not a set of ideas about a single topic but prescriptions for a whole way of life that shapes the souls of those called to be *saints*, the word Paul routinely uses for Christians. Christ's teachings speak to the heart of man. Following his Sermon on the Mount will move us closer to him, whom we are to imitate.

Unfortunately, there is division over the teachings of the faith. Many claiming the label "Christian" consider those things to be the "teachings of Christ" that reflect various agendas. Such selective teachings change with the times: muscular Christianity, Social Gospel Christianity, social justice Christianity, environmental Christianity. The name *Christian* has been watered down to an adjective for various groups: Christian democrats, Christian socialists, Christian feminists, Christian humanists, even Christian atheists.

If discipleship is considered at all, it is assumed that it means following an interpretation of Jesus' teaching or his "example" on a favored concern. Jesus did not turn away the outsider, so, it is claimed, he would accept transgender persons or same-sex couples as members of his Church in good standing – perhaps even as leaders. But such an editing of Jesus ignores the full scope of his teaching, including his warnings in Revelation about immorality in its various forms. It also veers off the clear path laid out for us in the Church's moral tradition, which is built on the testimony of generations of faithful disciples.

Discipleship is the ecumenism needed today. Christians – Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, or other – who are serious disciples recognize each other when they meet. They recognize each other as desiring to keep Christ's commandments and eager to realize his promise: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. . . . These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11). Our generation, like all those before, desperately needs the gospel. And to make disciples, disciples are needed.

James M. Kushiner is the Executive Editor of [Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity](#).

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Top illustration of disciples from the nations following Jesus Christ (c) by Rachel Chung



A Crown of Thorns for Christian Unity

by Michael Harper

The following address by Fr. Michael Harper was given at the Pentecost Prayer Vigil gathering sponsored by the Singapore Consultation, in Jerusalem, 1989. The Singapore Consultation was shortly afterwards named ICCOWE, the International Charismatic Consultations on World Evangelisation.

Behold now, what is so good or so pleasant as for brothers to dwell together in unity? It is like fragrant oil running down upon the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down upon the border of his garment; it is like the dew of Hermon, running down upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord commanded the blessing and life forever. Psalm 132/133.

This psalm is a song written for travellers. It is for people 'on the move'. The heading tells us it is a 'song of ascents' and therefore composed especially for pilgrims going up to Jerusalem to meet with God and respond to His word.

Because of this, it is particularly appropriate for Pentecostals and 'Charismatics' meeting for a Prayer Vigil in Jerusalem. We belong to a 'movement'. Pentecostals are more comfortable with this word than Charismatics, who prefer the word 'Renewal'. But we are 'on the move' as surely as the early pilgrims climbing the hills to the city of David.

Two clear messages are coming at this time to the people of God everywhere. We are all called to evangelise, and we are all called to be one in Christ.

We need to affirm the important link between these two divine imperatives. In John 11:51-52 Caiaphas prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation and for God's scattered children. This would bring them all together and make them one. Jesus died to save and unite His people.

This comes out even more clearly in Christ's high-priestly prayer in John 17. In the early part of it He is interceding for the apostolic team. 'I pray for these men,' He says (v. 20). But then He widens the scope of His prayer: 'but I am also praying for all people who will believe in Me because of the teaching of these men. Father I pray that all people who believe in Me can be one...then the world will know that You sent Me.' Here one of the purposes of unity is evangelism. A disunited Church has a weak testimony to a divided world.

Because Jesus prayed this prayer we can be sure of three things: 1. What He prays for is the will of God; 2. the prayer will be answered, in time; 3. we have a part to play because Jesus did not pray for unity on its own. We are part of the answer to His prayer. Jesus prayed for all who believe, that is, all Christians; therefore we all have a part to play in seeing that His prayer is answered.

Jesus' prayer for unity was in the upper room before the disciples crossed the Kidron into Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed again. 'My heart is full of sorrow and breaking in sadness', He prayed (Matthew 26:38). Perhaps Jesus' sorrow included the disunity of the Church, the dismemberment of His Body on earth, as well as the Cross He was about to endure.

Someone has said that Jesus has suffered three humiliations. His incarnation, when He came from the glory of heaven to the manger at Bethlehem; His death, when He was cruelly killed by His enemies. And the divisions of the Church, His own Body, which have caused Him so much pain and suffering, and weakened the effectiveness of our witness.

We know that discernment is an important key to good leadership, and that one way of seeing it is to 'have the mind of Christ'. Then unity comes from 'the heart of Christ'. To long for Christian unity, and pay the price for it, is to be close to His heart. We can see three important aspects of unity when we look at the pilgrim song of our Psalm.

1. Unity is something that comes from above

In this Psalm the fragrant oil is poured on the priest and the dew falls on Mount Hermon. Both come from above and both are words used to describe the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts. The prophecy of Joel was that Pentecost would be an outpouring of the Spirit, and in Acts 8 it is said that the Spirit had not yet 'fallen' on the Samaritans. The Holy Spirit in both cases came 'from above'.

Unity, like being baptised in the Spirit, is a divine gift. There is a need for human co-operation, but the blessing itself comes from God and no-one else.

When Acts describes the different events in which the blessing was given there is a builtin message that can be missed if we only see it as the gift of power. Acts 8 was a deep unity experience for Jews and Samaritans who had been locked for centuries in theological disputes which separated them. Acts 10, the Gentile Pentecost, was an experience of unity for Jews and Gentiles, who had been racially divided from the start. This event in Acts 10 was an argument-stopper. Peter said to the church leaders, 'God gave the same gift that He gave to us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. So could I stop the work of God? No!' (11:27). We are also told that 'when the Jewish believers heard this, they stopped arguing. Instead they praised God and said,

‘So God is allowing these non-Jewish people also to turn to Him and live’ (verse 18).

If we look at our Pentecostal/Charismatic history we see it as both an argument-stopper and a grace of unity. When God began to baptise Episcopalians in the Spirit, the Pentecostals could not argue. They had to accept them. When Roman Catholics began to speak in tongues and worship the Lord in the Spirit, Anglicans and Protestants were bound to receive them. We could not criticise God, far less try to stop this work of His. We were being united because we could see Christ in each other by the Spirit;

2. Unity is like perfumed oil

The spices in the oil had to be crushed to produce their perfume. The way of unity is not easy. Once when David du Plessis spoke in London, there was a prophecy which was later set to music - ‘I’m not putting on your head a crown of glory, but I’m putting on your head a crown of thorns’.

Unity, like perfume, smells good. As God anoints us with the Spirit of unity, so, like a deodorant, it covers unsavoury odours of the past and the present. Church history has some sad chapters as well as glorious ones, when greed, a competitive spirit, aggressiveness or a callous disregard for the sanctity of the Body of Christ, has stank. Pouring out this oil on the priest was also a messy business. It not only smelt, it stuck! Unity is like that. Some receive it as a blessing, others as something they don’t want. But it helps people to stick together, even if it is not usually neat and tidy.

3. Unity is like the dew of Heaven

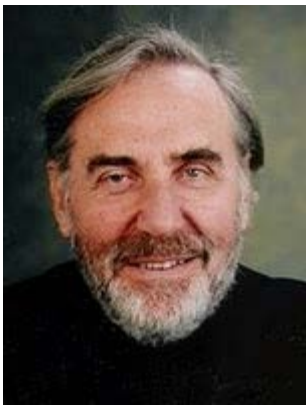
Dew is odourless, but it looks good. There is something magical, refreshing, but transient, about it. It sparkles in the early morning, but disappears in the heat of the rising sun. We can learn from this that our unity is delicate or fragile. As we discover more of this anointing of unity, we need to be careful to do what Paul advises: ‘make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace’, (Eph 4:3.NIV) . One false statement, a careless word, an uncharitable act, can put it all at risk.

Finally, this God-sent unity, as we receive it and keep it fresh as the morning dew, is where ‘the Lord commanded the blessing’ (Psalm 133:3. A.V.). It is a vital gift for world evangelisation. The dew of Hermon, according to this Psalm, will ‘come to the hills of Jerusalem’. We all need a fresh anointing, as we travel together as pilgrims to the new Jerusalem.

We often talk about ‘anointings’. Here is one of the most important, and Jesus prayed that we would all receive it. There are many we could mention who exemplified this grace. I would like to mention one: David du Plessis. For him, unity was a painful journey; he was criticised, ostracised and misunderstood. But he was faithful and paid the price. A few days after his death, the first Singapore Consultation (later ICCOWE, International Charismatic Consultation On World Evangelism) took place. It has led on to this Jerusalem Prayer Vigil, where many of David’s dreams are being fulfilled. David wore Christian unity as a crown of thorns. But praise God it is now for him a crown of glory!

This article is made available from the [Father Michael Harper Foundation](http://www.harperfoundation.com/books.html). The foundation website provides a number of Michael Harper’s books and articles online at: <http://www.harperfoundation.com/books.html>.

Archpriest Father Michael Harper (1931-2010) was a world-renown leader in the charismatic renewal movement. He was a minister in the Anglican Church for 40 years. He joined the Eastern Orthodox Church in 1995, and was appointed Archpriest of the Antiochian Orthodox Deanery of the UK and Ireland.



He and his wife Jeanne formed the Fountain Trust in 1964, which organized charismatic conferences all over the world at which he addressed thousands of people. Jeanne co-edited the songbook, *Sound of Living Waters*, which is still used by many charismatic churches today. Harper also founded Soma (Sharing of Ministries Abroad), which was committed to sharing ministries between the developed and developing world.

He was involved for many years with the World Council of Churches. He spoke at several Catholic meetings. He met Popes Paul VI, John Paul and John Paul II.

He also edited *Renewal*, the longest-established charismatic magazine in the world. He wrote 18 books, including the bestseller *Equal and Different*, which set out his views on women's ordination and the gender debate. Colleagues remember him as a man with the ability to build friendships across the Christian traditions. A gentle and humble man, Harper was nevertheless a dynamic speaker and networker, able to draw people in, whatever their background or differences from himself. He is survived by his wife, Jeanne.

Return to [Table of Contents](#) or [Archives](#) • (c) copyright 2019 [The Sword of the Spirit](#)

An Ecumenical Global Prayer Movement for Renewal and Mission - Pentecost 2019



“Come Holy Spirit: Thy Kingdom Come”

Almighty God, your ascended Son has sent us into the world
to preach the good news of your kingdom:
inspire us with your Spirit and fill our hearts with the fire of your love,
that all who hear your word may be drawn to you,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The following selection of Scripture Readings and Prayers is adapted from a prayer booklet developed by [Thy Kingdom Come](#), an annual ecumenical global prayer initiative which takes place between Ascension and Pentecost. These prayer resources can be used by individuals, families, communities, and churches. Feel free to use this shortened version adapted by Living Bulwark or the [longer version](#) available online - ed.

Introduction:

“All Christians are encouraged to seek the fresh empowering of the Holy Spirit so that we may live out our calling to be witnesses to Jesus Christ.”

[Thy Kingdom Come](#) is an annual ecumenical prayer initiative which takes place between Ascension and Pentecost. It originally began in the Church of England in 2016 and has since grown into a global ecumenical prayer movement. The nine days between Ascension and Pentecost have always been infused with expectation and anticipation. When our Lord Jesus Christ ascended into heaven forty days after his resurrection, he promised his disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit to enable them to be his witnesses.

As those first followers waited for the promise to be fulfilled by constantly devoting themselves to prayer (Acts 1:11), so the renewed call across the church is to set these days apart to pray. In the gospels we read again and again how people would bring friends, loved ones, family members, and children to Jesus.

There is a recommended focus for prayers in these nine days — most particularly to bring to God five individuals, that they might have an encounter with Jesus Christ. > Click [here](#) for the [evangelism prayer journal](#) and action plan.

ASCENSION DAY - THURSDAY - May 30

Scripture

Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

Hebrews 9.24

Prayer

Almighty God, your ascended Son has sent us into the world to preach the good news of your kingdom: inspire us with your Spirit and fill our hearts with the fire of your love, that all who hear your Word may be drawn to you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Collect for Thy Kingdom Come

Intercession

‘Thou that hast given so much to me, Give one thing more, A grateful heart.’

George Herbert

FRIDAY AFTER ASCENSION - May 31

As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to human beings, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

Hebrews 2.8b-10

Almighty God, who sent your Spirit to be the life and light of your Church: open our hearts to the riches of his grace, that we may bring forth the fruit of the Spirit in love and joy and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

‘God creates out of nothing. Wonderful you say. Yes, to be sure, but He does what is still more wonderful: He makes saints out of sinners.’

Soren Kierkegaard

SATURDAY AFTER ASCENSION - June 1

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8.38,39

O King enthroned on high, Comforter and Spirit of truth, you that are in all places and fill all things, the treasury of blessings and the giver of life, come and dwell with us, cleanse us from every stain and save our souls, O gracious one. Amen.

an Orthodox prayer

‘We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence.’

Mother Teresa of Calcutta

SUNDAY - June 2

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.”’ Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive.

John 7.37-39a

Blessed are you, creator God, to you be praise and glory for ever. As your Spirit moved over the face of the waters bringing light and life to your creation, pour out your Spirit on us today that we may walk as children of light and by your grace reveal your presence. Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

‘The right way to pray is to stretch out our hands and ask of One who we know has the heart of a Father.’

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

MONDAY - June 3

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. Isaiah 40.28-end

Come, O Spirit of God, and make within us your dwelling place and home. May our darkness be dispelled by your light, and our troubles calmed by your peace; may all evil be redeemed by your love, all pain transformed through the suffering of Christ, and all dying glorified in his risen life. Amen.

‘Be who God made you to be and you will set the world on fire.’

St Catherine of Siena

TUESDAY - June 4

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

I Corinthians 12.4-7

Father, let your Spirit come upon us with power to fill us with his gifts. May he make our hearts pleasing to you, and ready to do your will. We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Prayer from the Office of Readings

‘Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.’

Helen Keller

WEDNESDAY - June 5

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

Joel 2.28,29

Almighty God, who called your Church to witness that you were in Christ reconciling men to yourself: help us so to proclaim the good news of your love, that all who hear it may be reconciled to you; through him who died for us and rose again and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

‘Come, Lord, stir us up and call us back. Kindle and seize us. Be our fire and our sweetness. Let us love. Let us run.’

Augustine of Hippo

THURSDAY - June 6

Jesus said, ‘Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!’

Luke 11.9-13

O God the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: we beseech you, leave us not comfortless, but send your Holy Spirit to strengthen us and exalt us to the place where our Saviour Christ is gone before, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

To pass through the door that leads to God’s kingdom, we must go down on our knees.’

Catherine Doherty

FRIDAY - June 7

In Christ every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes’. For this reason it is through him that we say the ‘Amen’, to the glory of God. But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first instalment.

2 Corinthians 1.20-22

Almighty God, you have broken the tyranny of sin and have sent the Spirit of your Son into our hearts whereby we call you Father. Give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service, that all mankind may be brought to the glorious liberty of the sons of God; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

SATURDAY - June 8

The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3.17,18

God of power and mercy, send your Holy Spirit to live in our hearts and make us temples of his glory. We ask this through Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Prayer from the Office of Readings

‘The music of the gospel leads us home.’

Frederick Faber

THE DAY OF PENTECOST - June 9

Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’

John 20.21,22

Father of light from whom every good gift comes, send your Spirit into our lives with the power of a mighty wind, and by the flame of your wisdom open the horizons of our minds. Loosen our tongues to sing your praise in words beyond the power of speech, for without your Spirit man could never raise his voice in words of peace or announce the truth that Jesus is Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one Go, for ever and ever.

Prayer for Pentecost Day from Office of Readings



Extending God's Kingdom Together as a Community of Disciples on Mission

by Carlos Mantica

"The pedagogy of the Incarnation teaches us that people need clear models to guide them. It was said that the greatest political relevance in the Middle Ages was the foundations of the Benedictine monks, because their form of community life became the great model for the social organization of fledgling Europe; Latin America also needs such models"

(Puebla, Latin American Catholic bishops document, 1979, ch. 171).

A society with Gospel values

Learning to live as members of a renewed Christian society is not an easy business. It is a high calling and entails a very deep level of commitment, both to God and to our brothers and sisters in Christ. It entails a death to self and a renunciation of the values of our current secular society.

- In a secular society which values absolute personal freedom as an inalienable right, our way of life calls us to move from independence to interdependence and on to brotherhood and sisterhood.
- In a secular society centered on competition as the key to personal success, our way of life proclaims collaboration, mutual help and service for the growth and well being of all.
- In a society that applauds rebels, whatever their cause, our way of life insists on relationships of authority and subordination that do not diminish the dignity of the person.
- In a society that has stopped believing in the sanctity and importance of marriage, our way of life fosters an ever-increasing affection, kindness and commitment between husband and wife.
- In a society in which emotions are the absolute criterion for action, our way of life builds its relationships on people's given word and solemn commitment.

In a secular society that no longer proclaims freedom of worship or religion but freedom from any religion or worship, our community way of life presents a people who value their relationship with God above all other values.

- In a society that disregards all morality or introduces a supposedly human morality, we insist on obeying the law of God with all its implications.
- In a society in which people pride themselves on doing whatever they want, our way of life proclaims that doing the will of God is the absolute criterion for action.
- In a society that demands justice, we proclaim mercy.
- In a society full of violence, our life upholds the wisdom of self-sacrificing love.
- In a society full of anxiety, where mental disorders and depression are quite common, the new society in Christ testifies that people can live today in harmony, joy and peace.

In our local communities of the [Sword of the Spirit](#), we aim to live a distinct Christian way of life – distinct in its economics, laws and manner of governing, in its lifestyle and values. Despite the barrage from the secular media offering an often twisted and superficial philosophy about how to live, we are doing what we can as a people to establish the Lord's kingdom on earth.

A distinctive people

The strategy of being a distinct people who influence the people around them is really God's own strategy. In the New Testament the Apostle Peter in his first letter gives one of the earliest definitions of the church, and in so doing echoes the Lord's call to the people of Israel in Old Testament times. To the Christians, Peter writes, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God" (1 Peter 2:9). God's plan was and still is to establish his church, this people set apart for him, as a city on a mountain top, a sign planted in the midst of the nations, light and salt of the earth, leaven in the dough – an instrument for the extension of the kingdom of God. But disgracefully, many Christians today have lost their sense of being a nation.

The example of Israel could help us understand our call to community, our call to become a holy people. Speaking through Moses, God told his people Israel that they should have nothing whatever to do with the wicked ways of the nations around them, for, he said, "You are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession" (Deuteronomy 7:6).

His people were supposed to be different from the other nations. In addition to the Ten Commandments, the Lord gave them many other regulations for their daily life, as detailed in the book of Leviticus and elsewhere. For example, they were to consecrate their first-born sons to God and circumcise all their sons. They were to avoid eating the meat of certain animals and were to offer to him the first fruits of their crops, the first-born of their animals, and a tithe of their earnings. These concrete norms constituted a whole way of living, a distinct culture. The importance of these for the survival of a people was made particularly clear when the people of Israel were exiled from their land, sometimes for long periods of time and in various countries. By virtue of their common and distinctive way of life, they have continued even to this day to be one people, one nation, set apart by their culture.

I believe the Lord has also called us as the Sword of the Spirit, this community of communities, to be his people, a distinctive grouping within the whole Christian people – not better, but distinctive – to whom he has given a particular mission. From the very beginning he has addressed the City of God and many other communities as "my people" and continues to speak to the whole Sword of the Spirit in this way. Like the People of Israel, we find ourselves dispersed all over the world, made up of people of different races and languages. What gives us an identity in such a diversity is our culture. We are supposed to be a distinct environment, a distinct people with its own culture, even though formed from people of diverse races, languages

and cultures around the world.

We are on the way to being brothers and sisters in a very deep way, as we more and more share a common way of life together. Our unity, although still imperfect, is already a reality, a kind of utopia before our eyes. We believe the Lord has called us to be a community of disciples on mission and is in the process of forming us into one people. We have the same God, have all been called to follow the Lord and have accepted Jesus as our Lord and Savior. He has made a covenant with us and joined us all into one people, and we in turn have made a covenant with one another, even with those we might never see. He chose us and gave us a new name and a new identity. And among us there is a real confidence that what we are involved in is something that was his initiative and not merely human.

A distinctive way of life

As a community of communities we have our own way of praising and worshiping the Lord. Our music – strong and at times martial – is fitting for a people who are in a spiritual battle, a people at war, and differs noticeably from the sweet, almost lyrical music of other groups. Our common form of praying reflects the vision we have of the Lord – the Lord of heaven and earth – and focuses on giving him the glory and praise that is his due, rather than primarily on asking for his help, although we do depend on him for even the smallest things and are open to seeing him work wonders, large and small, on our behalf. We have our distinctive way of honoring him by celebrating the Lord’s Day and relaxing together.

We have a distinctive way of exercising authority, with subordinates being encouraged to take initiative and bear responsibility. We have a distinctive way of relating to secular authority. A way to share our material goods and money. A distinct way of relating as husband and wife, with the husband serving as the head of his wife, and she the suitable helper and necessary complement for him. A distinct way of speaking, in which the words “brother” or “sister” flow naturally and in which we work to eradicate from our speech all negative humor, name-calling, sarcasm, slander, vulgarity and rudeness. And we try to live our lives in the light, not in secretiveness or darkness. Brotherly correction is given and received in humility; exhortation and counsel are received gracefully. If there is an argument or a difficulty in a relationship, we know how to heal it, asking and giving forgiveness and owning up to our faults. And we don’t harbor anger or bitterness in our hearts.

We have an approach to sexuality that is different from the world’s but at the same time joyful and full of thanksgiving. There is a clarity about our identity – the men dressing and acting as men, and the women dressing as women. We have a distinct process of dating and courtship among the young people, with the young men showing signs of respect to young women.

We have forms of giving and receiving respect between children and adults, men and women, and between members of the community and their leaders. When we have guests, the children give their seats to the older brothers and sisters, whom they treat with respect, calling them “uncle” or “aunt”. But the children are also taken into account and treated with respect: they are not only our children or our nieces and nephews, they are also our young brothers and sisters in the Lord. Among themselves the children treat one another with affection, as brothers and sisters or cousins. We also have a distinct way to form our children so they will grow up as confident people, loving God and loving those around them.

We have a distinct way of viewing the world around us and what is happening in it. A distinct attitude toward life and death. Toward sickness and suffering and trial. Toward success, riches, friendship and happiness. In our homes we live a life that is quite similar from one family to the next, and distinct from the world’s way. Each of us takes time for personal prayer and we all read the scriptures. We offer prayers of thanksgiving before meals and have times of family prayer. We have family nights and celebrate the Lord’s Day. We pray over one another very

naturally for various needs. The use of TV is limited. Hospitality is very much a part of our daily lives, and in many cases, single brothers and sisters make their home with families, sharing a common life. We know how to value and administer our time and we try to schedule it wisely so that we can be faithful to commitments and punctual at meetings.

These are all elements of a culture that we consciously try to live out. We should feel proud to be part of this people and proud of our way of life.

We feel that the Lord has called us to live a way of life that is radically distinct from the world around us and opposed to many of its ideals, values and customs, and this is not an easy task. The world may not applaud us for it. In fact, the Lord warns us in scripture that if people persecuted him, they would also persecute us, his disciples.

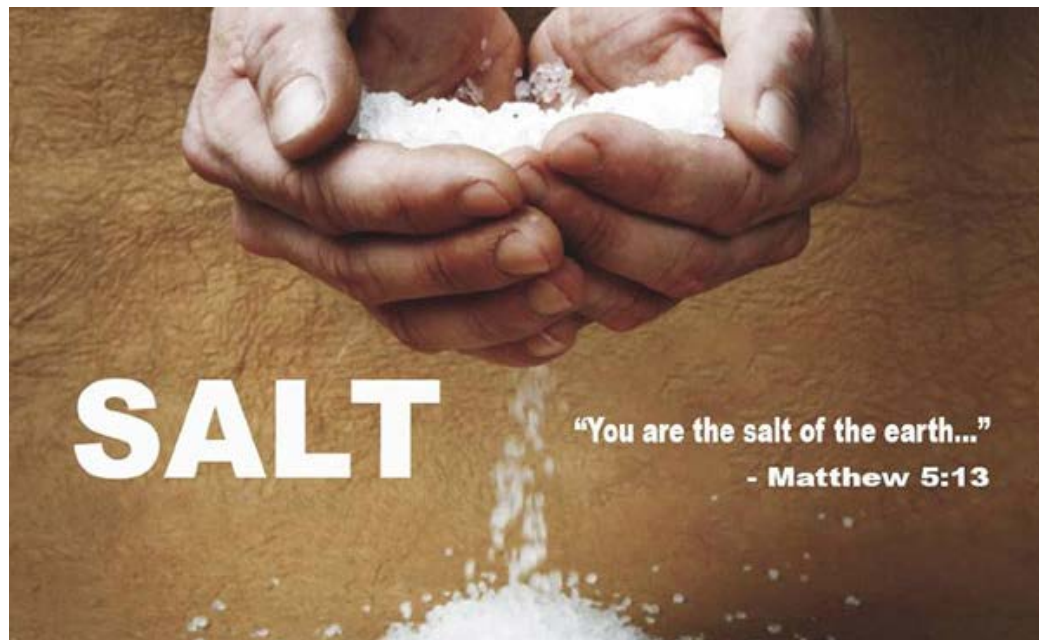
The Lord has always asked his disciples to love one another as he loved them. Today he is raising up disciples in communities, called in a special way to radically live out that love as brothers and sisters in Christ, committed to one another in a way that touches every area of life, and every moment of every day. Christians have always been called to be in the world without being of it, to be salt and light. In this particular moment in history, in which the values of the world threaten large segments of the church, the Lord is calling some Christians to form communities, “fortresses”, that are joined together as a bulwark to strengthen and protect his church and foster the spread of his good news – to be a people set apart for him, living according to his ways.

> See other [articles](#) by [Carlos Mantica](#) in Living Bulwark

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Return to [Table of Contents](#) or [Archives](#) • (c) copyright 2019 [The Sword of the Spirit](#)



Salt of the Empire

The Role of the Christian Family in Evangelization

by Mike Aquilina

Years ago, I came across a children's book that told the history of the early Church in small words and in large, brightly colored pictures. The first few centuries were pretty much distilled into a few pages with a simple message, which I'll summarize here:

The wicked Roman Empire prevailed for a long time, killing Christians by the thousands, till one day the pagan emperor Constantine was crossing a bridge. He looked up into the sky and saw a cross in the clouds and he heard a voice saying, "By this sign, you shall conquer." So Constantine became a believer, and from that moment on the Roman Empire was a Christian Empire. The End.

If only evangelization were that simple. If only God would always make the gospel immediately relevant by raising a huge cross in the sky and thundering a command from above. If only he would transform our culture by the miraculous conversion of its most influential leaders, starting with the emperors of politics and culture.

The truth, however, is that the Christianizing of the Roman Empire after Constantine was a messy affair – perhaps messier than it had been before, during the almost three centuries of persecution. The Eastern and Western lands went about the work of Christianizing in radically different ways; nasty disputes arose over the relationship between throne and altar; a rift appeared between East and West, which would eventually leave the Eastern peoples vulnerable to the rise of Islam and ultimately widen into a schism that tragically split the Church in two.

So much for the storybook ending of a Christian empire. Yet the truth about the early Christians is more exciting, more instructive, and even more miraculous than the storybooks convey. It is a

story not so much about emperors and armies as about families and how they changed the world.

Astonishing Growth

The truth is that, by the time Constantine legalized the practice of Christianity in 313, the empire was already heavily Christianized. By the year 300 perhaps 10 percent of the people were Christians, and by the middle of the century, Christians may well have been a majority of the citizens, 33 million Christians in an empire of 60 million people. So Constantine did not so much ensure Christianity's success as acknowledge it. His edict of toleration was overdue recognition that the Church had already won the empire. We were already in the majority.

These were not 33 million "nominal" Christians – not 33 million "cafeteria Catholics" and "chaplain to the culture" Protestants. They could not be. They did not have the luxury of being lukewarm. In the decade before Constantine's edict, the Church had suffered its most ruthless and systematic persecution ever under the emperor Diocletian and his successors. The practice of the faith was, in many places, punished by torture and death. In many places, to live as a Christian meant, at the least, to accept social stigma and humiliation. What is more, the Christian way itself was characterized by demanding disciplines in the life of prayer and in the moral life.

To be a Christian was not easy in the year 300. It cost something. Whether or not you were martyred, you had to pay with your life. Christians were laying their lives on the line every time they attended the liturgy, and they continued to do so through the course of every day.

Yet the rate of conversion throughout the empire – beginning with the first Christians, long before Constantine – was most remarkable. A few years ago, an eminent sociologist, Rodney Stark of the University of Washington, set out to track church growth in the ancient world. He gathered his findings in *The Rise of Christianity*. Dr. Stark is not a Christian and had no vested interest in making Christianity look good.

What Stark found in his study of the first Christian centuries was an astonishing growth rate of 40 percent per decade. Again, Constantine gets no credit for this growth. Most of it happened in the years before he was born. In fact, even though conversions were coerced at various times after the year 380, the Church never again witnessed the kind of growth that took place when conversions were costly.

Stark holds that most growth came from individual conversions, and not only from the poor, but also from the merchant and upper classes. He argues that most converts were women, that women benefited greatly from conversion, and that some women – though never ordained to the priesthood – were influential leaders. Using historical data and sociological methods, he argues that the Christian population grew by 40 percent a decade, from about 1,000 Christians in the year 40 to 7,530 in 100 to a little over six million in 300 and 33 million in 350 – growing, in the hundred years between 250 and 350, from about two percent of the population to slightly over half.

Misery and Fewer Girls

Stark vividly describes the misery of ordinary citizens in the cities of the pagan world. All but the rich lived in cramped, smoky tenements – one family to a small room, with no ventilation or plumbing – which frequently collapsed or burned. The cities were horribly crowded, a city like Antioch having perhaps 200 people per acre, plus livestock (modern Calcutta has only 122 people per acre). Constant immigration meant that the cities were peopled by strangers, with the resulting crime and disorder, so that the streets were not safe at night and families were not even safe in their homes.

Human waste was thrown into open ditches in the middle of the narrow streets, and the cities were smothered in flies attracted by the filth. The corpses of those who died of natural causes

were sometimes left to rot in the city's open sewers. ("The stench of these cities must have been overpowering for many miles – especially in warm weather," Stark noted.) Water was hard to get and almost always foul.

Life expectancy was at most around 30 for men and perhaps much lower for women. Hygiene was minimal. Medical care was more dangerous than disease – and disease often disfigured its victims when it did not kill them. The human body was host to countless parasites, and tenements were infested by vermin. For entertainment, people thronged to the circuses to see other people mutilated and killed.

And pagan marriage offered no respite from this misery. Greco-Roman women were usually married off at age 11 or 12, to a mate not of their choosing, who was often much older (Christian girls tended to marry at about 18). Afterward, they suffered in predatory relationships rife with contraception, abortion (which often killed the mother), adultery, and unnatural sexual acts.

Infanticide was common, especially for female or defective offspring. Of the 600 families who show up in the records from ancient Delphi, only six raised more than one daughter. Though most of those 600 families were quite large, they had all routinely killed their baby girls. Stark quotes a letter from a pagan businessman writing home to his pregnant wife. After the usual endearments, he closes his letter by saying, briefly and casually, "If you are delivered of a child [before I come home], if it is a boy, keep it, if a girl, discard it."

If fewer girls lived to see the second day from their birth, still more died on their way to adulthood. The shortage of women, then, played further havoc on the population growth of the empire, as well as its economy and its morals. Homosexual activity was considered normal for married men.

Attractive Homes

That is the world in which the first Christians were born, in which they grew up and married, and in which they raised their families. You might call it a culture of death.

But Christian marriage and childrearing immediately set Christians apart. According to Stark, Christian husbands and wives genuinely tried to love one another, as their religion required. Their mutual affection and their openness to fertility led to a higher birthrate, and thus to a still higher growth rate for the early Church. They did not abort their children, nor did husbands endanger their wives' lives by doing so.

The early Christians' respect for the dignity of marriage made the faith enormously attractive to pagan women. So women made up a disproportionate number of the early converts. This in turn made Christianity enormously attractive to pagan men – who could not find many pagan women to marry, but saw young ladies attending the Christian liturgy in great numbers.

We should not dismiss these benefits of Christianity in the natural order. One thing that the rise of Christianity demonstrated is that faithfulness to the one true God is the best way to happiness, not only in heaven, but also in the world that God created. Christian faith, then as now, makes for happy homes. And, in pagan cultures, then as now, happy homes are very attractive. The evidence seems to indicate that, in the Roman Empire, Christian homes provided the Church's primary place of evangelization. And that the Church grew because in every place it lived as a family.

This is something we do not find too often in the published lives of the saints, which tend to focus primarily on extraordinary events and great miracles. Nor do we find this story told in ecclesiastical histories, which tend to focus almost exclusively on the lives of the bishops and the clergy. Yet it is the true story of the Church. As St. Augustine put it, the story of the growth of the gospel was the story of "one heart setting another on fire."

The fire of charity tended in the Christian home soon consumed city blocks and then neighborhoods. It was not the sort of ecstatic experience we see in the account of the first Pentecost in the Acts of the Apostles. It was, rather, quiet and gradual. Let us look at just one example of how this fire of charity burned.

Epidemics were among the great terrors of life in the ancient world. The physicians in those days knew that the diseases were communicable, but they knew nothing about bacteria or viruses, never mind antibiotics or antiseptics. Once the diseases hit your hometown, there was really no stopping them. Several major epidemics ravaged the empire during the rise of Christianity, and each of them reduced the empire's population by about one-third.

The Fire of Charity

Yet even in these circumstances, the Church grew. In fact, amid simultaneous persecutions and epidemics, the Church grew still more dramatically, especially in proportion to the total population of the empire. Everywhere people were dropping like flies, but the Church was growing.

How did that happen? Look at what ordinarily happened when an epidemic hit your hometown. The first people to leave were usually the doctors. They knew what was coming, and they knew they could do little to prevent it. The second-century pagan physician Galen admits that he fled, in his description of the worldwide epidemic during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. The next ones to leave were the pagan priests, because they had the means and the freedom to do so.

Ordinary pagan families were encouraged to abandon their homes when family members contracted the plague. Again, they knew no other way to isolate the disease than to leave the afflicted family member behind to die, perhaps slowly.

Yet Christians were duty-bound not to abandon the sick. Jesus himself had said that, in caring for the sick, Christians were caring for him. So, even though Christians knew no more about medicine than the pagans did, they stayed with their family members, friends, and neighbors who were suffering. Consider this account of the great epidemic of the year 260, left to us by Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria:

Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending their every need and ministering to them in Christ – and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. . . . Death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.”

We also possess pagan accounts of that epidemic, and all of them are characterized by despair. Yet the Christians were “serenely happy.” Nor was this an extraordinary event. Stark says that Syrian Antioch, considered the second city of the empire, experienced 41 natural and social catastrophes of this order during the years when Christianity was on the rise. That is an average of one cataclysmic disaster every fifteen years.

Christianity had the same effect in other ways, as Stark noted. It offered cities filled with strangers, orphans, widows, the homeless, and the poor a new family and community and a new way of life that freed them from many of the fears that tortured their pagan neighbors.

Amid all that havoc, Christian charity, which usually began in the home, brought church growth. Christians were much more likely to survive epidemics because they cared for one another. Mere comfort care cut the Christians' mortality rate by two-thirds when compared with the pagans'.

What is more, the Christian families cared for their pagan neighbors as well. Thus, the pagans who received Christian care were more likely to survive and, in turn, to become Christians themselves. Thus, in times of epidemic, when populations as a whole plummeted, church growth soared.

The Spreading Flame

The pagans tended only to take care of those in their group. While pagans would only help their brothers, Christians treated all men as their brothers. And the pagans took notice. The wicked emperor Julian, who despised all Christians and led the charge to re-paganize the empire, still had to grudgingly admire their charity: “The impious Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well. Everyone can see that our poor lack aid from us.”

I cannot emphasize enough that this charitable activity was not so much the work of institutions as of families. The family was then, as it is now, the fundamental unit of the Church. Until the third century, most Christians did not have a building they could call their “church.” Their Christian life was centered in their homes. Institutionalized charitable organizations were still years away in the future, to be established during more peaceful times.

In the beginning, charity was, rather, the way of Christian family life. This routine of charity did not so much constitute a new culture, replacing the old, at least externally. Outwardly, little had changed in the neighborhoods inhabited by Christians. The law, the government, the routines of daily life remained as they were – and as they would largely remain, intact, even after Constantine. But inwardly, everything had changed.

We see the means of this transformation, even very early in Christian history. A document of the early second century, the anonymous Letter to Diognetus, describes the process in profound yet simple terms. The writer points out that Christians are not distinguished from other people by anything external: not their country or language, not their food or clothing, but by what he calls the Christians’ “wonderful and striking way of life.”

They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not commit infanticide. They have a common table, but not a common bed. . . . They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. . . . To sum it up: As the soul is in the body, so Christians are in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. . . . The invisible soul is guarded by the visible body, and Christians are known indeed to be in the world, but their godliness remains invisible.

Gradually. Invisibly. But inexorably. This is the way that Christian doctrine, hope, and charity transformed the Roman Empire – one person at a time. Christianity transformed the way neighbors treated the sick, the way parents treated their children, and the way husbands and wives made love.

That is what really happened to the Roman Empire. The gospel of Jesus Christ gradually spread, from person to person, from family to family, from home to home, from neighborhood to neighborhood, then to entire provinces. Conversion took place in the smallest increments, one by one, because of homes.

The Domestic Church

When we read about our ancestors in the faith, their deeds cry out for modern imitation. I will be so bold as to draw out six lessons the ancient Christian families can teach modern families.

1. Come to see your home as a domestic church. Modern Christians tend to think of their parish

buildings as “the church.” We have to believe that our families are the church, that our homes are the church, and that the kingdom of God begins in the place we hang our hats and eat our meals. We need to imitate the early Christians in seeing our homes as places of worship and fellowship, as sources of charity, and as schools of virtue.

St. Augustine once addressed a gathering of fathers as “my dear fellow bishops.” That is the role that parents play in the domestic church.

2. Make your domestic church a haven of charity. One of the most striking descriptions of the early Church comes from Tertullian, who wrote: “It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents, who say, ‘See those Christians, how they love one another.’” This love has to begin at home. It has to begin in the domestic church.

How many of those who decry the lack of reverence in their churches then go home to desecrate their domestic churches by harsh words toward their children or toward their spouses or by gossip about their neighbors or their co-workers? We will all be called to account for this. Remember the words of Tertullian. They will know we are Christians, not by the icons on our wall, or the fish symbols on our bumper stickers, or the grotto in our front yard, or by our WWJD bracelets, but by the love in our hearts, expressed in our homes.

3. Make your domestic church a place of prayer. This does not mean that your day has to be dominated by devotions, but you should have some regular, routine family disciplines of prayer. The early Christians saw this as necessary and so observed “stational hours” of prayer throughout the day – and even throughout the night. In the third century, Tertullian described Christian families in North Africa rising in the middle of every night to pray together.

Most Christians today do not rise at 3 a.m., and I am not suggesting we should. There are many ways to pray as a family, and you should seek out the ways that work best for your tribe. You can pray together at the beginning of the day or at the end of the day. You should pray together, at least, by offering grace at every meal. You can begin a weekly family Bible study. You can join in the weekday worship your parish church offers. The important thing is to do something, start somewhere. Begin with something small and manageable, and then give yourself time to grow into it.

Apostles of Charity

4. Know that, as a domestic church, you are “on mission.” Like the universal Church, you are sent by Christ to bring the gospel to the world. You are sent outward from your home. “Sent” is the root meaning of the word apostolate, and you and I and all our children are called to share in the Church’s apostolate, to be apostles to the world.

Imagine yourself as one of those invisible Christians living in the ancient cities that were rotting with epidemics. What would you do? What would you have your family do? Would you flee the city while your neighbors died? Would you board up the windows and position your shotgun? You would do as your ancestors did and go out and serve your neighbors.

Nowadays, we can cure many of the ancient plagues. But we should all ask ourselves: What epidemics are consuming the families in our neighborhoods today? What is it that’s tearing the neighbor families apart? What is it that leaves them scarred and barely able to go on in life? How about divorce? Illegitimacy? Abandonment . . . that constant sense that they are not wanted by someone they dearly love? Perhaps we need to expand our definitions of poverty and epidemic, in order to see the people our families must serve today. There are probably people on your block who are very lonely, elderly and alone, or mourning, or otherwise in need.

How might your family help? Sometimes helping is as simple as making meals, opening the door

to your home, even sharing your children's "artwork" for the neighbors' refrigerators. It does not have to be a lavish program. But this sort of charity should be an ongoing family project. Christians sometimes go overboard in shielding their family from strangers and from nonbelievers. But as Mother Teresa of Calcutta said, Christ will sometimes come to us in these distressing disguises. We have to open wide the doors to Christ. That is part of what it means for us to be on mission.

One of the great Fathers of the Western Church, St. Jerome, said: "The eyes of all are turned upon you. Your house is set on a watchtower; your life fixes for others the limits of their self-control." But our lives cannot set limits for others unless we open our lives and our homes to others – and unless (see lessons two and three) we live as if our house was set on a watchtower.

Luminous Grace

5. Cultivate the virtue of hope. Divine grace has unlimited power. It can transform persons; it can and has transformed cultures. As parents, as parishioners, and as neighbors, we have to believe in miracles. We have to believe that people can change. It is too easy for us to believe that many people are hopelessly lost, have been by the culture or their own lives irremediably inoculated against the gospel. But this is simply not true. Read the agnostic Rodney Stark: Miracles do happen, people do change, towns and cities and nations can convert to Christianity at the rate of 40 percent per decade.

6. Live by the teachings of the Church. We need to raise our homes up to the standards of Jesus Christ and his Church. It is a high standard, but the alternatives today are deadly. The early Christians did not convert the empire by compromising with the empire's ideas of family life. They did not compromise on divorce, contraception, abortion, infanticide, or homosexual activity.

The early Christians hated these sins, even as they passionately loved the sinners who committed these sins – the sinners who lived in their neighborhoods. We, too, need to hate these sins and keep them far from our own homes. But we need also to help other homes, other families to live according to Jesus' teachings. We need to evangelize the families who need us. If we do not, then we can count ourselves with the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan, who passed by the man in the ditch.

I close not with a quote from the early Christians but from a contemporary Christian, Pope John Paul II, who in *On the Laity (Christifideles Laici)* drew a lesson from the early Church as he instructed families in the ways of evangelization:

Animated in its own inner life by missionary zeal, the Church of the home is also called to be a luminous sign of the presence of Christ and of his love for those who are "far away," for families who do not yet believe, and for those Christian families who no longer live in accordance with the faith that they once received. The Christian family is called to enlighten "by its example and its witness . . . those who seek the truth."

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Return to [Table of Contents](#) or [Archives](#) • (c) copyright 2019 [The Sword of the Spirit](#)



Holding the Palm of Martyrdom

from a homily by Gregory the Great (540-604 AD)

Today we are celebrating a martyr's birth into the life of heaven. If we are striving with the Lord's help to live out the virtue of patience, we hold the palm of martyrdom even though we are living in a time of peace. There are in fact two kinds of martyrdom. One takes place only in the heart, the other in both heart and body. We too are capable of being martyrs, even without having anyone slay us. To die from someone's enmity is martyrdom out in the open; to bear insults, to love a person who hates us, is martyrdom in secret.

Jesus testified to both of these kinds of martyrdom, one that takes place in our hearts, the other in public. He asked the sons of Zebedee, *Are you able to drink from the cup that I am to drink?* When they immediately answered, *We are able*, he replied, *You will indeed drink from my cup*. What do we take his cup to be if not his passion, of which he said elsewhere: *Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me?* But in fact the sons of Zebedee, James, that is, and John, did not both die as martyrs. Each heard that he would drink from the cup, but John's life did not end in public martyrdom. Even so, he was a martyr. He sustained in his heart the suffering he did not undergo in his body. We too, following his example, can be unbloody martyrs if we truly hold to patience in our hearts.

Hold to patience in your hearts, my friends, and put it into action when the situation calls for it. Don't let any abusive word from your neighbor stir up hatred in you, and don't allow any loss of things that pass away to upset you. If you are steadfast in fearing the loss of those things that last forever, you will never take seriously the loss of those that pass away; if you keep your eyes fixed on the glory of our eternal recompense, you will not resent a temporal injury. You must

bear with those who oppose you, but also love those you bear with. Seek. an eternal reward in return for your temporal losses.

None of you should count on being able to carry this out on your own. Obtain it by your prayers, asking God who commands to provide it. We know that God gladly listens to those who ask him to grant what he commands. When we continually besiege him in prayer, God quickly comes to our assistance in temptation.

(excerpt from *Be Friends of God: Spiritual Reading from Gregory the Great*, translated from the Latin by John Leinenweber, 1990, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, Massachusetts.)

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Who was Gregory the Great?

A few [highlights](#) from his life written by editors of [Christianity Today Magazine](#)

Noble beginning

Gregory (540-604 AD) was descended from Roman nobles with a strong legacy of Christian faith. He was related to two previous popes (Felix III and Agapitus I), his aunts were nuns, and his parents joined cloisters in their later years. He was raised in Rome when it was only a shell of its former glory.

By the age of 30, he was the chief administrative official of the city, responsible for finances, police, provisioning, and public works — an experience that helped him hone his administrative skills and, together with his personal wealth, gave him the opportunity to create six monasteries.

Yet Gregory remained dissatisfied, and upon his father's death in 574, he converted his house into a monastery and retired to a life of contemplation and prayer. During these years, the happiest in Gregory's life, he began a detailed study of the Scriptures. Here he also ruined his health with fasting, a sacrifice that would precipitate his early death.

Called again to service

His administrative skills did not remain unappreciated. In 577 Pope Benedict appointed Gregory one of the seven deacons of Rome, and Pope Pelagius II sent him to Constantinople in 578 as representative to the imperial court, then later recalled him to serve as his confidential adviser.

In 589 a flood destroyed the grain reserves of Rome, instigating a famine and then a plague that swept through Rome and killed Pope Pelagius. Gregory was elected to succeed him. Though he had tried to refuse the office, once elected, he went to work with vigor.

To deal with the famine, Gregory instituted a city-wide penance, fed people from the church's granaries, and organized systematic relief for the poor.

Gregory then set himself reforming the church. He removed high officials "for pride and misdeeds," enforced celibacy, replaced lay officers with monks, and initiated a reorganization of "the patrimony of Peter," the vast land holdings of the church. The efficient and humane management of these estates brought in the revenue necessary to run the church as well as perform tasks the imperial government was neglecting...

Pastoral care

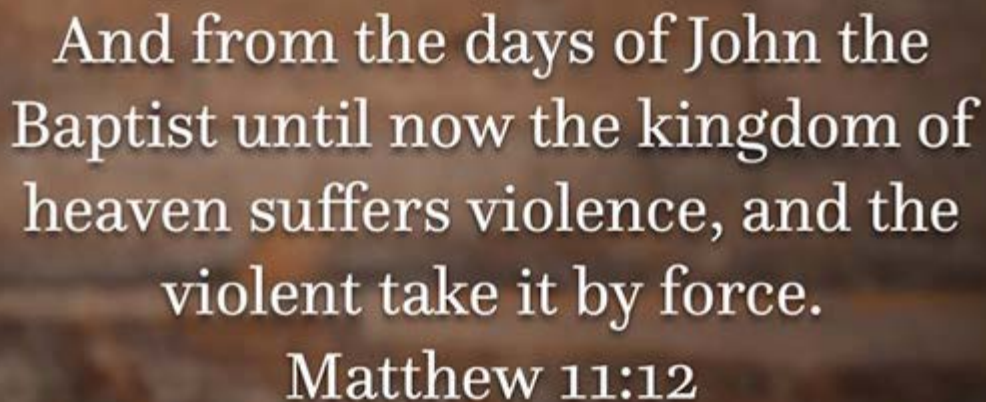
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Gregory believed preaching was one of the clergy's primary duties, and he conducted a preaching tour of area churches. His Homilies on the Gospels was published in 591 and widely used for hundreds of years.

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His frequent correspondence across the world shows him well aware of evangelistic opportunities in Britain. So it is not surprising that in 596 he sent Augustine, along with 40 monks, on a mission to "this far corner of the world."

Return to [Table of Contents](#) or [Archives](#) • (c) copyright 2019 [The Sword of the Spirit](#)



And from the days of John the
Baptist until now the kingdom of
heaven suffers violence, and the
violent take it by force.
Matthew 11:12

The Kingdom of Heaven Suffers Violence

from a homily by Gregory the Great (540-604 AD)

From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.

Let us consider these words of our Christ very carefully. We must ask how the kingdom of heaven can suffer violence, who inflicts violence in heaven, and why, if the kingdom of heaven is able to suffer violence, it has endured it only since the days of John the Baptist?

When the Law says that if anyone does this or that they will surely die, it is obvious to everyone who reads it that all transgressors were struck with severe punishment, and that the Law did not restore them to life through repentance. Yet when John the Baptist came as forerunner of our Redeemer's grace, he preached repentance so that sinners who were dead as a result of their sins might be converted and live. Truly, then, from his days the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence. What is the kingdom of heaven but the place where the righteous live? The reward of a home in heaven is owed only to the righteous; the humble, the pure, the meek, and the merciful attain the joys of heaven. When those who have become swollen with pride, who have slipped into sins of the flesh or been inflamed with anger, or who must take blame for their cruelty, turn to repentance after they have sinned and receive eternal life, it is as if they enter a strange and unfamiliar place. What has John done by proclaiming repentance to sinners except to teach that violence is done to the kingdom of heaven?

My friends, let us think over the evils we have done, let us present ourselves before God with sorrow. By repentance we can seize the inheritance of the righteous, which we do not deserve by our way of life. God, the all-powerful, longs to suffer this kind of violence from us. He longs for us to seize the kingdom of heaven, which we have done nothing to deserve, by our tears. We must not let the nature of our wickedness, or its extent, break our hope.

Let the good thief show us the confidence we can have in pardon. He was not good because he was a thief, since his cruelty led him to that. His confession of guilt made him good. Think how incomprehensible is the mercy of our all-powerful God! The thief was caught red-handed in his thievery and hanged on a cross. There he confessed his guilt, there he was forgiven, there he was

found worthy to hear Jesus say to him: *Today you will be with me in paradise*. How can we begin to describe God's great goodness? How can we begin to value it? From a criminal's punishment, the thief came to the prize for virtue!

Almighty God has allowed his chosen to succumb to certain sins. This is so that he may restore hope of forgiveness to others, who are under sin's domination, if they will only rise up to him wholeheartedly: for then God can open up for them the way to heaven through sorrow and repentance. Let us then embrace sorrow, let us rid ourselves of our sins by tears and *fruits worthy of repentance*. We must not squander the time that has been granted us. We see so many freshly washed clean of the wrongs they have done: what else do we have in them except a pledge of the compassion from on high?

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Return to [Table of Contents](#) or [Archives](#) • (c) copyright 2019 [The Sword of the Spirit](#)

[June/July 2019 - Vol. 104](#)



Risen Christ Seated on the Throne as Ruler Over All - mosaic, 1300 AD, in San Giovanni church baptistry in Florence, Italy

“Sit At My Right Hand” – Royal Messianic Psalms

By Jeanne Kun

Not only a king but also a priest forever; this is the surprising promise God makes to his Anointed in this messianic psalm. God’s people will be ruled by a mighty champion who will be both king and high priest.

– Mike Aquilina and Christopher Bailey

Many of the psalms of ancient Israel were composed to be recited by the king or as prayers, thanksgivings, or blessings for the king. Some of these “royal” or “kingship” psalms (among them, 18, 20, 21, 45) celebrate events in the lives of Israel’s kings, who were considered God’s representatives on earth. (Such events might be a coronation ceremony, a ritual anointing, an enthronement ceremony, a marriage, or a victory over enemies.)

Other psalms recall the promises God had made to King David – promises of an eternal dynasty and of a kingdom that would last forever. Because they were faced with the disasters and sins of the monarchy that unfolded after the reign of David, the people of Israel came to hope that these promises would be fulfilled in a “hero-king” yet to come. This anointed leader or “Messiah” (in Hebrew,

Psalm 110:1-7

- 1 The LORD says to my lord,
“Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies your
footstool.”
- 2 The LORD sends out from Zion
your mighty scepter.
Rule in the midst of your foes.
- 3 Your people will offer themselves
willingly
on the day you lead your forces
on the holy mountains.
From the womb of the morning,
like dew, your youth will come to you.
- 4 The LORD has sworn and will not
change his mind,
“You are a priest forever according to
the order of Melchizedek.”
- 5 The Lord is at your right hand;
he will shatter kings on the day of his
wrath.
- 6 He will execute judgment among the
nations,
filling them with corpses;
he will shatter heads
over the wide earth.
- 7 He will drink from the stream by the
path;
therefore he will lift up his head.

Understand!

1. Jesus fulfills God’s promises to ancient Israel in ways that go far beyond Jewish hopes and expectations. What light does Psalm 110 shed on your own understanding of who Jesus is?
2. Mark 14:61-62; 16:19; 1 Corinthians 15:25; and Hebrews 1:13; 10:13 amplify the visual image and setting evoked by the opening verse of Psalm 110. What do these images convey to you about Jesus?
3. Why is Psalm 110’s prophetic allusion to Jesus’ priesthood significant? How did Jesus carry out

mashiah means “anointed one”) would be descended from David and would throw off the oppressor’s yoke, restore the kingdom, and carry on the glorious reign of David forever.

Thus, Jews and Christians alike consider those royal psalms referring to the idea of the anointing of the king as “messianic” psalms (among them, 2, 72, 89, 110, and 132).

Christians also recognize as messianic several psalms of lament – 22, 31, 69, and 118. These laments have overtones of hope, victory, praise, and thanksgiving in them, as they refer to a figure that is scorned and humiliated yet ultimately vindicated, prefiguring Christ. (*Christos* is Greek for “anointed one.”) Consequently, Christians recite and pray both groups of messianic psalms as prophecies about Jesus, God’s anointed king and Messiah, who is also the crucified Lord, risen from the dead and seated at the right hand of the Father.

Jewish tradition interprets Psalm 110 as referring directly to the Davidic monarchy and to the Messiah-king-to-come, the son of David. Christians see in it a foreshadowing of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, true Son of God, the messianic king and eternal priest.

Originally, Psalm 110 was prayed – or delivered as an oracle by a prophet – at a new king’s coronation and enthronement ceremony. Verse 1 – “The Lord said to my lord, /’Sit at my right hand” – means that the Lord God is speaking to the king and installs the king at his right hand, a place of prestige and honor. The New Testament writers see this as referring to Jesus and quote Psalm 110 more often than any other psalm. In particular, its first verse alone is quoted or alluded to at least ten times in the New Testament (Matthew 26:64; Mark 12:35-37; 14:61-62; 16:19; Luke 20:42-43; 22:69; Acts 2:34-35; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Hebrews 1:13; 10:13).

Psalm 110 begins with the declaration that it is God who establishes the new king in his authority over his people (signified by the “mighty scepter”) and brings him victory over his enemies, putting them under his feet (verses 1–2). Verse 4 speaks of the king inheriting a priestly role: “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” Like Melchizedek, who was both priest and king of Salem at the time of Abraham (Genesis 14:18-20), the newly enthroned king of Jerusalem is also a priest.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews cites Psalm 110:4 to explain Christ’s priesthood and connect it to

this priestly role in his life? What are some gospel incidents that depict Jesus in this role?

4. Jesus used Psalm 110 to argue that the Messiah is not just another descendant of David, but someone superior to him, of exalted and transcendent origin (see Matthew 22:41-46; Mark 12:35-37). Is Jesus implying that he is the Son of God? How do you think his use of this psalm helped the early Church come to an understanding of who Jesus is and to a Christian interpretation of the psalm?

5. Read Psalm 72, another of the royal messianic psalms. Pick out several verses in which you recognize messianic overtones. Name several attributes ascribed to the king in Psalm 72 that are also applicable to Jesus.

Grow!

1. How have you experienced Jesus’ kingship over your life? How does your life give concrete witness to others that Jesus is your Lord and Messiah? How do you show honor to the Lord in your life?
2. What manifestations of Jesus kingly authority do you see in the world? In what ways might God be calling you to manifest his authority over heaven and earth? Are you willing to join the “forces on the holy mountain” (Psalm 110:3) to win the battle against sin and death?
3. Recall an occasion when Christ delivered you from a difficulty that was overwhelming you. Are there any “enemies”—for example, sinful habits, negative attitudes or emotions, anxieties, false accusations against you—that are currently threatening to undermine your life or relationship with the Lord? How confident are you that

Melchizedek (5:5-6; 7:17, 21). The psalm's prophecy is accomplished and the priesthood of Melchizedek is completed in Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. Moreover, as Pope Benedict XVI has noted, "the offering of bread and wine, made by Melchizedek in Abraham's time" is fulfilled by Jesus, "who offers himself in the bread and in the wine and, having conquered death, brings life to all believers" (General Audience, November 16, 2011).

The final verses of Psalm 110 depict a triumphant sovereign. Supported by the Lord, who has given him power and glory, the king opposes his foes, crushing his adversaries and judging the nations. Verses 5–6 prophetically point to the Christian truth that in the ongoing battle between good and evil, Christ, our true King and Priest, prevails, victorious over Satan, sin, and evil. However, the New Testament refrains from applying the ancient mentality and gruesome imagery of verse 6 to Jesus in its literal sense: Christian theology understands that Jesus did not come to "shatter heads" and "heap up corpses" but rather to overthrow Satan so that mankind might be freed from bondage to sin and the power of darkness.

Verse 7 – "He will drink from the stream by the path; / therefore he will lift up his head" – offers us an enigmatic image of the king. At a moment of respite during battle, he quenches his thirst at a stream, finding in it refreshment and fresh strength to continue on his triumphant way, holding his head high in the confidence and assurance of victory. This verse may be an allusion to a particular quasi-sacramental rite – drinking from the spring of Gihon, south of the city of Jerusalem, where the royal anointing ceremony took place (1 Kings 1:33, 8-40). It also calls to mind Gideon's army, composed of those who had lapped water from the stream before battle with the Midianites (Judges 7:5-6).

Jesus Christ, true Son of God, is the messianic king and eternal priest, risen from the dead and seated at the right hand of the Father.

In the Spotlight

Shedding Light on Scripture's Obscurities

Countless variations exist between the many manuscripts

God can (and will!) "put these enemies under your feet"? What might you do to grow in a deeper trust in God?

4. Jewish authorities were hard-hearted in their view of Jesus and refused to consider that he might truly be the Messiah because they had false assumptions about what this promised one would be like and do. Think of a time when you failed to recognize God's presence and action in your life because you were expecting something else. How did you finally become aware that the Lord was at work in those circumstances?

5. As Christians, we are anointed as "priest, prophet, and king" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1546) to participate in the mission of Christ in the world. In what ways do you see yourself fulfilling these roles? How can you be a prophetic voice to your family, friends, and neighbors?

Reflect!

1. Reflect on this observation from John Paul II:

The Fathers [of the Church] were firmly convinced that the Psalms speak of Christ. The risen Jesus, in fact, applied the Psalms to himself when he said to the disciples: "Everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44). The Fathers add that in the Psalms, Christ is spoken to or it is even Christ who speaks. In saying this, they were thinking not only of the individual person of Christ, but of the *Christus totus*, the total Christ, composed of Christ the Head and his members. (General Audience, March 28, 2001)

containing portions of Scripture that were copied by hand and passed down during more than two millennia. For example, several verses in the Hebrew manuscripts from the tenth century A.D. differ from the Greek translation of the Hebrew found in the manuscripts of the fourth century A.D.

Occasionally, parts of the original texts were lost or badly corrupted. Consequently, translations into English and other vernaculars also differ in their renderings of difficult texts. Adding to the challenging task of translation is the fact that biblical Hebrew is written only with consonants. Thus, vowels, though sometimes indicated by diacritic marks, are unclear or ambiguous, so the meaning of many ancient Hebrew words can only be surmised.

Scholars recognize Psalm 110 as one of the oldest psalms. It's also considered one of the most difficult to understand. In the Septuagint, a Greek translation made in the third to second centuries B.C. of the available Hebrew texts, verse 3 reads (though somewhat obscurely) as a description of the divine sonship of the king and his birth or "begetting" on the part of the Lord: "Yours is princely power from the day of your birth. / In holy splendor before the daystar, like the dew I begot you" (New American Bible). This is the interpretation that the Church accepted, and this reading of Psalm 110 has had a place in Sunday Vespers in the Liturgy of the Hours from its beginning. Verse 3 has also been associated with the *lucernarium* (the ancient blessing of evening lights), referring as it does to the brightness of the daystar.

However, in some Hebrew texts, verse 3 seems to describe, also without much clarity, the "mustering" of an army and the nation's people willingly responding and gathering around their sovereign on the day of his coronation. This meaning is reflected in the New Revised Standard Version: "Your people will offer themselves willingly / on the day you lead your forces / on the holy mountains. / From the womb of the morning, / like dew, your youth will come to you."

Many uncertainties about how to best translate certain words and portions of the Hebrew Scriptures may never be resolved. Nonetheless, today's biblical scholars and experts in the study of ancient languages continue to devote their skills and energies to shedding light on Scripture's obscurities and bringing God's inspired word to us as accurately as possible.

In the Spotlight

Messianic Psalms of Lament

As an observant Jew, Jesus prayed the psalms throughout his

Now read one of your favorite psalms as if it is Christ speaking to you. What difference does this make in how you pray the psalm? What might Jesus want to tell you? What might the "total Christ," the Church, be saying?

2. Read and meditate on these words of the prophet Nathan regarding King David's dynasty and the Gospel texts referring to how this is fulfilled in Jesus:

The word of the LORD came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: . . . the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. . . . Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever. In accordance with all these words and with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.

Then King David went in and sat before the LORD, and said, "Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? And yet this was a small thing in your eyes, O Lord GOD; you have spoken also of your servant's house for a great while to come. . . . And now, O Lord GOD, you are God, and your words are true, and you have promised this good thing to your servant; now therefore may it please you to bless the house of your servant, so that it may continue forever before you; for you, O Lord GOD, have spoken, and with your blessing shall the house of your servant be blessed forever." (2 Samuel 7:4-5, 11-14, 16-19, 28-29)

The angel [Gabriel] said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will

life, and words from them were on his lips during his agony on the cross. His cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46) comes from the opening of Psalm 22, a lament that ends in profound trust in God. And with his dying breath, Jesus cried, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46; Psalm 31:5).

Psalms 22, 31, 69, and 118 contain many images that correspond to details that the evangelists recorded about Jesus' passion—for example, casting lots for Jesus' garments (Psalm 22:9; Matthew 27:35) and giving vinegar to Jesus in his thirst (Psalm 69:21, John 19:29).

Psalm 118 in particular helped early Jewish believers who accepted Jesus as the Messiah understand his horrific death a part of his messianic identity and role. It serves as a link between the more purely messianic psalms about an anointed king to come, the glorious descendant of David, and psalms about a suffering figure, because it depicts one who is hard-pressed and under mortal threat (118:11-13) but then saved by God (118:14, 17).

As early Christians came to understand it, "the stone that the builders rejected," who is Jesus, "has become the chief cornerstone" (118:22; Matthew 21:42; Mark 8:31; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7). Thus, the Church added these psalms of lament with their descriptions of suffering, shame, reproaches, mockery, and humiliation (and ultimately, deliverance as well) to the psalms they considered "messianic" in their prophecies about Jesus. As the Trappist monk and spiritual writer Thomas Merton wrote:

When we recite the Psalms we must learn to recognize in them the suffering and triumphant Messiah, confessing Him with our mouth and believing in our heart that God has raised Him from the dead. Then we reap the abundant fruits of His Redemption. (*Bread in the Wilderness*)

In the Spotlight

Vengeance and Curses in the Psalms

How do Christians pray psalms that contain vindictive curses and calls for God to take vengeance on the enemies of the psalmists? At least thirty such outbursts are included in the Book of Psalms. Here are just a few:

He will repay my enemies for their evil. / In your faithfulness, put an end to them. (Psalm 54:5)

Let death come upon them; / let them go down alive to Sheol. (Psalm 55:15)

So repay them for their crime; / in wrath cast down the peoples, O God! (Psalm 56:7)

Let them be blotted out of the book of the living; / let them not be enrolled among the righteous. (Psalm 69:8)

reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. (Luke 1:30-35)

When [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16-21; see also Isaiah 61:1-2)

Act!

Exercise your trust in s power to transform you. Look back at Question 3 in the Grow! section above. In light of your reflections on "enemies," ask the Lord to "rescue" you. During the coming week, bring your needs before the Lord in prayer each day. Then cooperate with his work in you. Don't forget to thank him for his saving action.

In the Spotlight

David's Enduring Throne

Counted among the royal and messianic psalms, Psalm 89 joyously celebrates the unconditional promise that God made to establish King David's dynasty. Although David and his descendants failed to keep God's commands and were to be justly punished as a consequence (Psalm 89:31-33), God

Such verses, called “imprecatory prayer,” “vent the rage of saints who recognize that vengeance is exclusively God’s territory, but who at the same time feel the injustices of this world very deeply and who desperately want God to correct the inequities that always seem to leave the righteous/weak at the mercy (or mercilessness) of the wicked/powerful,” according to Scripture scholar Kevin J. Youngblood. “Throughout church history, Christians have wrestled with the tension created by the presence of such prayers alongside Jesus’ ethic of love and forgiveness.”

As Christians, however, our true “enemies” are sin and death. We can read these prayers with that idea in mind, recognizing that we are all involved in a spiritual battle against evil. We can also feel the same outrage as the psalmist at the evil that we see, even while retaining an attitude of forgiveness. Finally, these prayers help us to release our desire of vengeance to God. We can trust in God’s justice. This frees us from the need to take revenge upon ourselves, allowing us instead to be merciful to our enemies.

This article is excerpted from [The Psalms: Gateway to Prayer](#), by Jeanne Kun (Copyright © 2013 by The Word Among Us Press). Used with permission. This book can be purchased from [The Word Among Us Press](#).

Jeanne Kun is a noted author and a senior woman leader in the [Word of Life Community](#), Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. Jeanne Kun is also an active member and past president of [Bethany Association](#).

> [See other articles by Jeanne Kun](#)

nevertheless declared,

I will not violate my covenant,
or alter the word that went forth from
my lips.

Once and for all I have sworn by my
holiness;

I will not lie to David.
His line shall continue forever,
and his throne endure before me like
the sun. (89:34-36).

However, in events that seemed to belie God’s word, Israel fell into disgrace at the hands of a foreign nation. Her king was brought down, and it appeared that David’s line had been cut off (Psalm 89:38-45). How could Israel reconcile this destruction with God’s promises? The situation required that God’s promise to David be understood in a new sense—as a description of an ideal king who would one day inherit David’s throne.

Psalm 89 ends with a great cry wrenched from the heart of a disappointed yet hopeful people (89:46-52). In anguish, the psalmist implores God to remember his promise and restore his people by sending a righteous king to reign over them again: “Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, /which by your faithfulness you swore to David?” (89:49).

The people of Israel were mistaken in their understanding and expectation of a political ruler, yet their faith would finally be vindicated. God would answer their pleas not by restoring the ancient monarchy but by raising up, in the words of one hymn writer, “great David’s greater son.” Ultimately, Jesus Christ, a descendant of David, would rule over all as king, savior, and Messiah.

Return to [Table of Contents](#) or [Archives](#) • (c) copyright 2019 [The Sword of the Spirit](#)



Moms on Mission

by Amy Hughes

The idea for this particular collective - [The Lois Project](#) - took shape in a movie theater last summer. It had been growing inside me, this idea, for several months before it had a name and substance in my mind. And somehow, something about this movie scene connected the thoughts buzzing around in my head. It seems fitting to share it here as we launch our second year of stories and testimonies.

My husband had convinced me to see *Dunkirk*, and I agreed even though I don't like war movies. After cowering through much of the beginning, I found myself transfixed by a scene where a fleet of little boats heads into war-torn waters. What is striking is that they are not military boats at all but rather beautiful yachts, oiled to a shine and decked with colorful banners and flags. As British and French soldiers wait stranded and helpless on the beaches of northern France, these little boats are commissioned by the British government to go on a rescue mission through enemy fire— to go where the large military boats cannot (or will not) go. It is breathtakingly beautiful to see these pleasure boats become a means of salvation as they somehow seem to fulfill a destiny so much greater than perhaps originally intended.

I identified with the little boats. I'm just a mom with young kids - and I'm barely keeping it together as it is. The things that I'm good at don't always seem helpful. I don't have a lot of time or energy right now. What can I offer to God's kingdom? How can I join in the fight?

Maybe you too, feel like a little boat (or a capsized boat, on the bad days). But maybe you, with your particular talents and gifts can go where others can't or don't go. Maybe you can reach out and connect with someone that others could not. And maybe the things that seem frivolous, decorative, or just-for-pleasure in your life can become more than that, little boats launched in faith upon the waves.

Just being in a caregiving position gives you special access to the lives of those you care for. As you take care of their needs you model Christ to them in humble, tangible, daily ways. When your kids or grandkids see you react patiently, it puts weight behind your verbal pleas for them to act patiently with one another. When your students or those under your care see you demonstrate mercy, they have a better idea of what the mercy of Jesus is like.

Besides facing the daily tasks of motherhood or spiritual motherhood with grace, perhaps you have been gifted in other ways. I have a friend who finds joy in hosting beautiful parties and dinners. She loves opening her home and showering people with beauty. Who knows how many have been touched by her hospitality for the kingdom? Another friend has a gift for deep conversation and stirring hearts. Another writes poems so beautiful they make you cry. I love to make things, and sometimes I use my crafts as a way to reach out to other moms with similar interests. I also love to write, which was part of the motivation behind this blog. Little gifts? Yes - they are little gifts that bring joy, but I argue that they can be of more than a little value when given over to God. Little warboats used on a rescue mission for His kingdom.

Little gifts can be of more than a little value when given over to God.

There is a mother in the old testament of the Bible who is asked to offer a small and precious gift out of the little that she has - to scrounge up a simple cake for a visitor during a drought time when she and her son are desperately starving and low on provisions. Perhaps you know her story - the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings. Elijah, a traveling prophet, says to her: "Don't be afraid... First make a small cake for me from what you have and bring it to me, then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel says; 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry...'" (1 Kings 17:13-14). She ends up trusting this promise and baking the precious cake with the last of her provisions. And to her amazement, the promise holds true! She and her household do not run out of flour and oil for themselves until the drought ended and they could once more find food. Moreover, when her son later falls ill and dies, Elijah cries out to God and God restores him back to life. Her choice to trust God, to "make a cake" out of what she has, has ripple effects and ends up vitally blessing her family.

I hope you don't think this is some kind of guilt trip about doing fewer things for yourself or adding more to your to-do list. It is in fact, the opposite. It is an upward call - not a call to do more or be more, but a call to see more opportunities in the things that you already do, in the gifts that you already have. To be open to the possibility that you, in this season where you might feel tired or limited, may have special access to the mission field - in your own family and in the larger world. A call to see motherhood, mentorship, caregiving, or teaching as a time of special grace, even when it doesn't feel like it. If you, like me, have in your life a collection of little boats or precious cakes - little talents or opportunities that could be used to reveal Christ - My prayer for you, my prayer for myself is not to underestimate them, and not to hold them back out of fear. *Here's what I have Lord. How would you have me use it? What unique ways would you use me this season?* And I pray that in giving them over to his use, you would experience his miraculous provision for you and your family - that what little energy you have would not run out.

It is a call... not to do more or be more, but to see more opportunities in the things that you already do, in the gifts that you already have.

There are plenty of books and blogs and articles out there that can help you feel better as a mom after you've had a hard day. But I've found often, in the midst of a hard race that what I need – even more than the voices of comfort and comic relief from the sidelines – are the exhortations of fellow runners - women who are running the same race, towards the same goal: Jesus Christ himself. Exhortations and stories from women like you that say *You can do it! You are strong!* Those are the stories we seek to share on the Lois Project: stories of everyday courage in the little things of life. Stories of women unafraid to pour themselves out for others, because they know the one who renews all things will give them strength.

Moms and mentors, this is how I want to kick off this year with you: with an echo of the words of Elijah to that other overwhelmed mom: *Do not be afraid.*

Do not be afraid to love Him with all you have. Do not be afraid for your family or yourself when you come up to the end of your strength or face major change or run into discouragement. Do not be afraid that you have nothing to give.

Your beauty is not frivolous; your gifts are not too small for Him to use. Your lack of energy or time is not what He sees. He sees your little bit of flour and oil and says “Bake a cake for me”. He sees your small, colorful boat and says “Go on a rescue mission for me”. He sees all our limitations as merely a stage to better display his greatness. So in a very real way, we weak, frazzled moms and caregivers can be a powerful force in the hands of our God. And as we press on and encourage each other as fellow runners, we can know that we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who is calling us graciously, to wholeness and holiness – that is, to himself.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses... let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

This [article](#) (c) by Amy Hughes was first published in [The Lois Project](#)

Amy was inspired to start [The Lois Project](#) as a way to combine her love of writing and deep discussion with her desire to strengthen connections between Christian moms. She has a degree in French Education and English and taught high school French before becoming a stay-at-home mom with her three children. Amy and her husband John are part of the Word of Life Community in Ann Arbor. She loves anything and everything to do with France, has read the Harry Potter books way too many times and has a mild addiction to baby girl hair accessories (and two daughters to wear them!)

[The Lois Project](#) is a group of Christian women from various cities, countries, and church backgrounds who feel a common call to be disciples on mission in all seasons of life. Most of us find ourselves in a season of care-giving as mothers, grandmothers, mentors, or teachers.

Many of our writers are part of an international, ecumenical Christian community called *The Sword of the Spirit*. Although we come from Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant traditions we seek to foster unity among these groups and work together.

www.loisproject.com
Instagram: @theloisproject
facebook.com/theloisproject

Top photo of evacuation of British troops at Dunkirk by a fleet of small civilian boats in May 1940



Promoting Christian Unity in the North American Region of the Sword of the Spirit

A report by by Joe Donovan

On the night before he gave up his life, Jesus prayed to his Father, “may they all be one as you, Father, are in me, and I in you.” [John 17:21] His dying wish is that all who believe in him would be drawn together in that unity of love which is the essence of the relationship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So that, “the world would know that you sent the Son.”

Indeed, the saving mission of the Son is impeded when his disciples are divided. Doctrinal and structural differences among Christian communions notwithstanding, there is a fundamental call here which is to love one another. Jesus’ desire for unity among his followers is founded upon relationships of mutual love, understanding and respect. It is a mutuality which reflects the life of the Trinity.

This desire to foster Christian love and unity is central to the self understanding and mission of the Sword of the Spirit. As it says in Our Call:

“We believe that the Lord desires to overcome the divisions among the Christian people (John 17:22-23). We therefore join ourselves to one another as brothers and sisters both as a response to the way God has worked among us and in the belief that it furthers the Lord’s work of unity and contributes to the life of the churches and the Christian people as a whole. We do so humbly, recognizing that our efforts are only a small part of what God is doing in the world today.”

In order to assist the leadership of the Sword of the Spirit to more effectively develop this aspect of our call, an Ecumenical Commission of the Sword of the Spirit has recently been formed. It consists of brothers from various regions around the world who work directly with the leaders of the communities in their region. The goal of this commission is to raise the level of awareness

about our call to ecumenism, to strengthen ownership of it and to offer ways this can be realized. For instance, monthly intercessions are sent out to members from Sword of the Spirit communities around the world. These are offered for the needs of Christian communities internationally.

“Unity begins with understanding each other and appreciating the distinctive gifts God has distributed in the broader body of Christ.”

Also, during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity the commission has promoted a booklet of prayer and reflection to be used throughout the Sword of the Spirit. By highlighting the unique gifts of various Christian communions, the booklet this year emphasized understanding and respect as key to unity. “Unity begins with understanding each other and appreciating the distinctive gifts God has distributed in the broader body of Christ.”

In addition to international efforts, the Commission encourages all the members to “act locally.” Here in New Jersey we have found ways to connect with several Christian communities and churches, especially those involved with university outreach. For instance, at Rutgers University where I serve, we have monthly chaplains meetings for shared prayer; annual nights of praise and intercession with a variety of on-campus Christian student groups and one-on-one meetings among the chaplains. This year I was asked to give the Chi Alpha, a Pentecostal student group, a talk on the baptism in the Holy Spirit. We regularly experience a fruitful exchange of gifts.

In the summer of 2016 Dave Hughes asked me to consider participating in the Commission. Since then it has been an honor for me to serve the North American Region both sharing what God is doing locally and encouraging the brothers and sisters keep this work of healing the Body of Christ at the forefront of our common mission. May the Lord Jesus be glorified in all these efforts and make us one.

This article was first published in the North American Newsletter of the Sword of the Spirit, April 2019..

Brother Joe Donovan is a life-long member of the Brotherhood of Hope..

illustration above from bigstock.com

Return to [Table of Contents](#) or [Archives](#) • (c) copyright 2019 [The Sword of the Spirit](#)



Bethany Association 10th Anniversary

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the formation of Bethany Association, an international, ecumenical, charismatic network of women who are living single for the Lord in the Sword of the Spirit.

When we first met together, there were 17 women throughout the Sword of the Spirit who had made lifelong commitments to living single for the Lord. Each of us had experienced this call as members of our local covenant communities, but we had no formal connection to one another. In 2009, after considering how we might come together to actively support one another, make our way of life more visible, and help young women who feel called to live single for the Lord in the Sword of the Spirit, we ratified our charter, and the Lord gave us our name Bethany Association.

In the North American Region, there are currently seven sisters who are members of Bethany Association: Jeanne Kun, Sherry Snyder, Sue Cummins, (The Word of Life, Ann Arbor, Michigan), Lori Covak (Community of Christ the Redeemer, St. Paul Minnesota), Nohelia Lopez (City on the Hill, Los Angeles, California) Marge Connelly (People of God, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania), and our newest member, Rebeca Sastre (Light of Christ Community, Grand Rapids, MI). In total, there are 21 sisters throughout the Sword of the Spirit with lifelong and full commitments.

In 2018, two of our founding sisters, Beth Melchor, (Asian Region) and Myriam Torres (North America) have passed away. These two women gave witness by their lives and deaths to the hope of the resurrection and the impact that women living single for the Lord can have in the Sword of the Spirit.

Over the past ten years, we have grown in our understanding of who we are and how we see ourselves serving our communities, our churches, and our Lord through our involvement in the mission of the Sword of the Spirit. Bethany sisters do not all live together nor do we have all our finances in common. Our local communities and our homes are the places from which we receive pastoral care, work to support ourselves, and serve. Like Martha



and Mary who served the Lord by offering him a home to rest in and be refreshed, we want to imitate the way they cared for the needs of Jesus and his disciples, but also were attentive to him and listened to his words.

As an association, we encourage young women in our communities and outreaches to live radical and dedicated lives for the Lord no matter what state of life they are called to live. Toward that end, we recently developed a booklet that can be used throughout the Sword of the Spirit as a resource for helping women discern their state in life.

Keep your eyes on the lookout for the unveiling of a new Bethany website where we plan to offer access to this resource guide and other inspirational materials. Bethany Association holds an international conference biannually — this coming August we will be meeting in Costa Rica — for its members. Young women in more serious stages of discerning a call to live single for the Lord are invited to join us. We also occasionally offer regional retreats.

Top photo: sisters with lifelong commitments at 2017 Bethany conference in Glasgow, Scotland.
Lower two photos: Myriam Torres and Beth Melchor of blessed memory

This article was first published in the North American Newsletter of the Sword of the Spirit, April 2019.

Return to [Table of Contents](#) or [Archives](#) • (c) copyright 2019 [The Sword of the Spirit](#)

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone.
But if it dies, it bears much fruit" - John 12:24

The following two reflections by Amin Kurani originally appeared in Living Bulwark in May and October 2012. With Amin's passing to glory in August 2018, we reprint them to commemorate a remarkable young man of God who helped many others grow as disciples of Christ. The artwork is by Amin's father, David Kurani, a noted Lebanese artist. - ed.



Trinity, scene from Lebanon, acrylic on canvas, 100 x 150 cm, by David Kurani

From Seed to Tree

by Amin Kurani
(1985 - 2018)

I remember being told about a man from a certain village, who planted trees in the late season of his life. He knew that the trees would only grow fully after he died. Nevertheless, he planted because he wanted to give his children a worthy inheritance.

I was struck by the man's foresight. He probably planted the trees with extra care because he knew their main purpose. I was also struck by the simplicity of his actions. It is not that hard to plant a tree. I have done it. A decent hole patted over with soil will often do. No one digs a mile-deep crater because they want a bigger tree.

There's lessons here which I want to apply in my life. First of all, my actions are more significant than I can guess at present. I can help someone even though they might not appreciate it at the

time. Secondly, I can realize how important “small” acts are, like spending time with another person.

The [artwork above] speaks to me of these lessons. If the tree is strong and its roots clench the rich red earth, it is thanks to someone who sowed a seed once upon a time.



Cyclamen, watercolor with body color 47 x 64 cm, by David Kurani

Spreading the Joy

There is something inspiring about the way in which nature abandons herself to joy. In spring, delight spills from the tiniest leaf, rivers swell with song, and flowers burst on the bramble in piercing color. Things are more reserved in the city, but the telltale signs are there. The insects get chattier. The cherry trees release showers of floating blossoms on unsuspecting joggers.

It's hard to imagine that only a short while ago winter was here and the land was hushed. How muted the colors were! How dark and skeletal the trees looked back then. The more one considers it, the more miraculous seems the change.

In the Middle East, it is traditional for women to let out a high-pitched trill, or *ululation*, on joyous occasions. Even when the celebration isn't about them, the women will sing as a way of expressing that your happiness is also mine. How much more powerful our own joy can be when, like nature in spring, it is shared with those around us. As someone once put it: “Every time I smile at someone, it is an action of love, a gift to that person, a beautiful thing.”

Amin John Kurani [1985 - 2018] was a full-time English instructor at the American University of Beirut where he distinguished himself as a student. He was at the doorstep of pursuing his PhD at the Lebanese University. Amin was a committed member of the Sword of the Spirit community, People of God. He was active in his commitment, and in his services covered a wide range. At UCO he was a pastoral leader for a

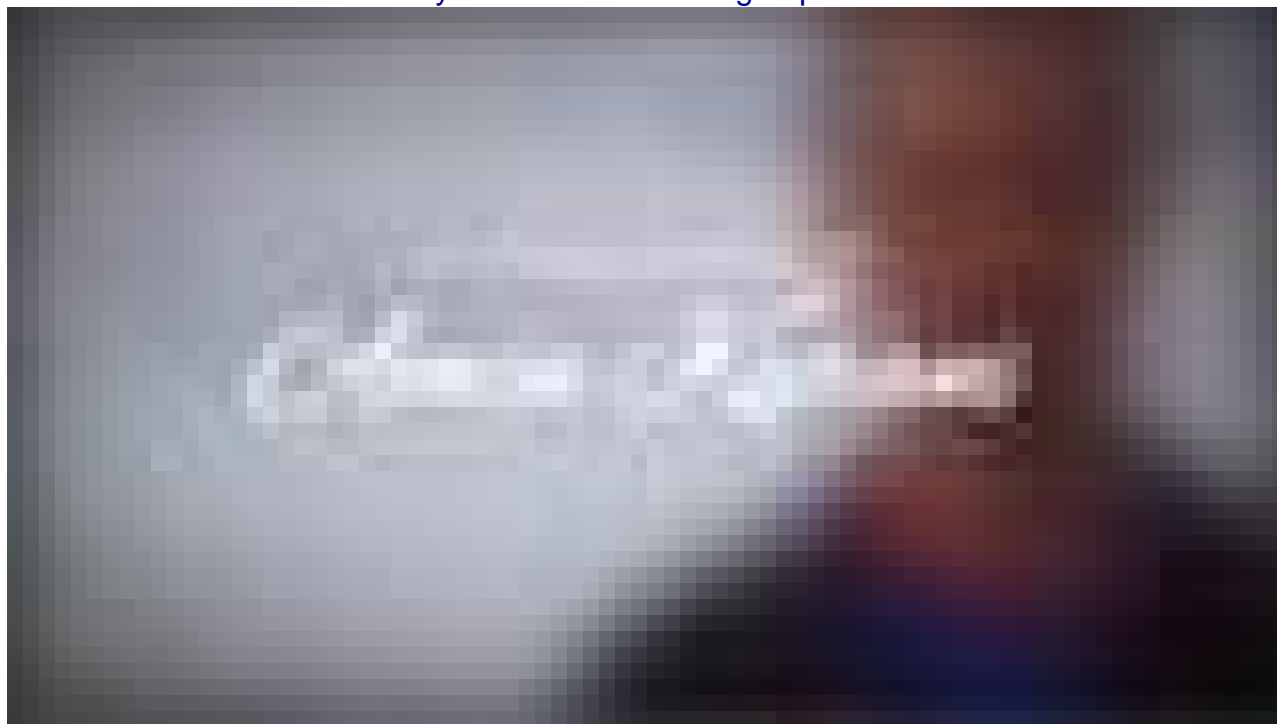


group of men and helped them grow in their Christian journey. He as well supervised the service of other pastoral leaders and helped them expand their leadership gifts. He helped lead prayer meeting, gave spiritual talks, and offered his English services whenever needed.

Amin was a kind spirit, he was famous for his constant widespread smile, and for his excellent listening skills. He had the gift of getting along with everyone, regardless of their age and background. He touched the lives of many people with his generosity and care, and maintained his trademark sense of humor, all the way to the end.

He suffered from a blood disease for three years before losing his life during the process of a bone marrow transplant. Amin leaves behind him many happy memories and remains as a motivation for the youth to constantly seek God in their lives as he did.

The following [video recording](#) contains excerpts from talks Amin Kurani gave to the University Christian Outreach group in Lebanon.



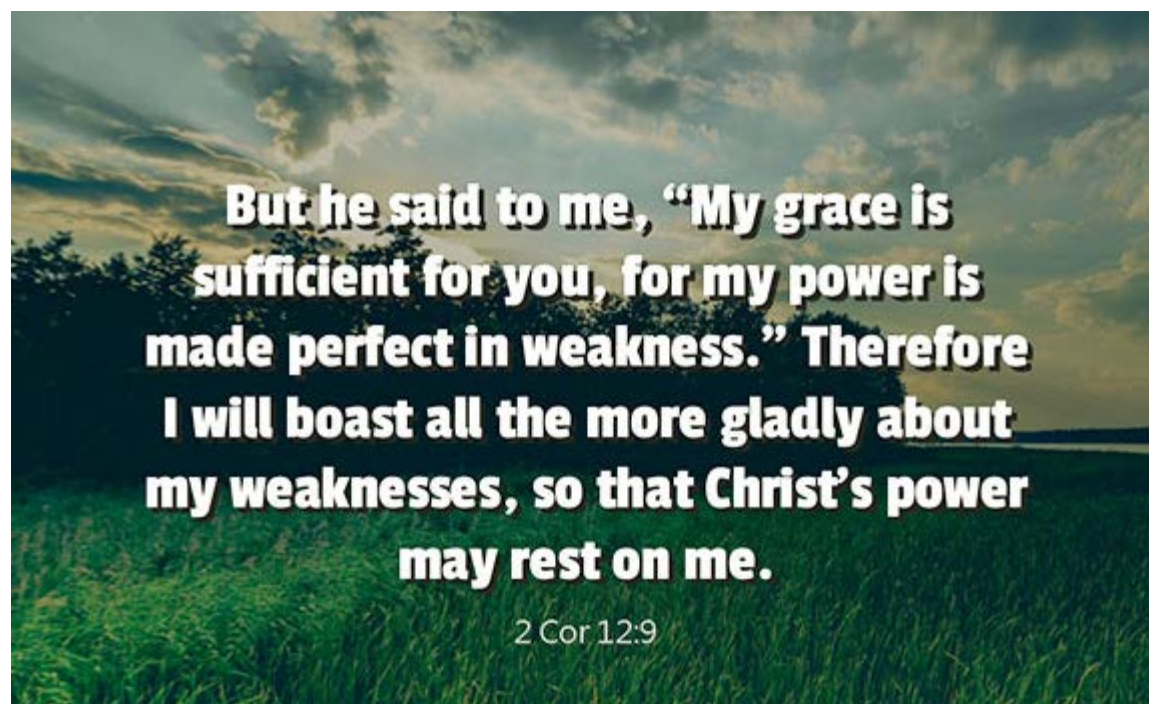
[source link](#)

“The Lord calls us every day to be renewed and to become no less than saints... Our walk with Jesus can be compared to climbing a mountain. There is always something better - something better that the Lord is calling us to. Something deeper and deeper - to discover him more and more – to grow more and more in him. This is a beautiful journey, sometimes difficult, but we look back and see that it is beautiful. Jesus is with us in all of this journey. Just like the good shepherd, wherever we go He is with us. Psalm 23 says, even though I walk through the valley of death, I fear no evil for You are with me.”

- from a talk by Amin to a University Christian Outreach group in Lebanon

> View more of [David Kurani's artwork](#) (father of Amin Kurani) in [Living Bulwark](#)

Return to [Table of Contents](#) or [Archives](#) • (c) copyright 2019 [The Sword of the Spirit](#)



Living with Thorns in the Flesh

by Tom Caballes

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me."
2 Corinthians 12:9 ESV

What are your character weaknesses – anger, lust, envy, self-pity, greed, pride, laziness, over-indulgence, lying, or something else? Is it judging others or gossip? Everyone of us has a special weakness; your weakness might be someone else's strength, and vice-versa. As we count the years of following God, we usually grow little by little, yet some shortcomings are very stubborn to get rid of. They come to us when we are not vigilant or at times of distraction. Some of these weaknesses we will have to battle with for a lifetime; we will never be without faults until we die. It is like having a lifetime nemesis. As Paul said, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12:10 ESV) How about you – what are your thorns in the flesh? Do you have a plan or a strategy to keep your arch-enemy in control? Are you prepared to face your life nemesis until the end?

So How Do We Battle Against and Live with a Thorn in the Flesh?

1. Pursue God and pursue holiness. Holiness does not come in a silver platter – it comes from pursuing God wholeheartedly and living a disciplined life. Ask the Holy Spirit to conquer daily your weaknesses. *Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. (Hebrews 12:14 ESV)*
2. Our thorns in the flesh keep us humble and serve as a reminder that we always need the grace of God daily in this life. As branches in the vineyard, we cannot live well if we are

disconnected to the vine. God gives us the grace to live a holy life. *Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. (John 15:4 ESV)*

3. We need to know ourselves and anticipate when we fail. A wax melts candle before a fire – keep the fires in our lives far away from where we melt easily. We need to guard our lips, eyes, and our hearts all the time.
4. Half the battle is within our minds. We always need to be vigilant and never let our guards down. *We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete. (2 Corinthians 10:5-6 ESV)*
5. Ask forgiveness from God. We are sinners before Him. God knows us intimately [see Psalm 139]. He knows our hearts even if we fail to conform to His ideals at times. Be confident of God's love and forgiveness.
6. Have personal accountability. Live in the light. Ask help from a trusted and mature person who can help you be accountable for the things you are weak with; use the support available so you can grow in holiness.
7. It is a lifetime battle. One brother shared that his battle with lust [maybe his thorn in the flesh] will only go away five minutes after he dies! Be patient, then. Look forward when one day, your life nemesis will disappear forever when we are with God in heaven. In Christ, you will win over your life nemesis!

Other Scripture passages:

1. *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15-17 ESV)*
2. *So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. (2 Timothy 2:22 ESV)*
3. *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:15-16 ESV)*
4. *Other Bible verses: Ephesians 5:8-11; Hebrews 4:13; James 4:7; 1 Peter 1:13-16*

For personal reflection or group sharing

- What are your “Thorns in the Flesh?” How are you managing them to keep them in control?



Tom Caballes is the National Senior Administrator and a National Coordinator of the [Lamb of God](#), a community of the Sword of the Spirit with 7 branches located throughout New Zealand. Tom also leads [Kairos New Zealand](#), an outreach program for high school, university, and post-university aged people.

Tom and his wife Mhel and their two daughters live in Wellington, New Zealand.

Top image credit: <https://thankgodquotes.com/2018/09/06/2-corinthians-129-2/>



Saying No To The Blame Game

by Tom Caballes

“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” - James 4:6 ESV

When things go awry in life, it is so easy to start pointing fingers at others. We look at possible culprits of why the things went haywire, and the last person we look at is ourselves if we ever do that. We tend to feel we are always victims of people and circumstances and it is never our fault—and by thinking this way, we are not able to resolve challenges, learn, and move on well. Many disagreements, divorces, and conflicts could have been avoided if we all look at ourselves first and not find scapegoats. Blaming others is a copout to what God wants us to do in our lives, which is to take personal ownership and responsibility for our lives. It blinds us from accepting our own mistakes and changing for the better. Blaming also causes a lot of strife and disunity within a family, with friends, at work, or in the Christian community. How often do you play the blame game?

So How Do We Avoid the Blame Game and Take More Responsibility for Our Lives?

1. Develop a habit of humility when we approach challenging situations. Instead of thinking first about how others contributed to the bad situation, look first at ourselves and how we affected the situation negatively. Stop being defensive; humbly admit your faults. If others did not perform their role well, let us look first if we did our job well or not. This is a habit to some that need to be slowly removed from their lives.
2. Stop making excuses about your life and move on. We can choose to blame every single bad thing to everyone – our parents, bosses, leaders, society, and so on. Making excuses justifies our negative situation in life – and we stay there. We box ourselves from growing. If people abused and hurt us in the past, we need to reconcile with them, forgive them from the heart, and carry on in life by taking ownership of our direction in life. Don't carry any resentments and hurts in life; these things tie you up from being free to live out your life well fully.